Among Women: Toni Morrison's Mothers, Sisters, and Daughters.

Hazel Ruth reames Caillouet

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/6470

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI
A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700  800/521-0600

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
AMONG WOMEN:
TONI MORRISON'S MOTHERS, SISTERS, AND DAUGHTERS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in
The Department of English

by
Hazel Ruth R. Caillouet
B.S., Louisiana State University, 1982
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1990
August 1997

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
Dedication

To

the women in the trees
Acknowledgements

A special thank you to my committee members--Carol Mattingly, John Lowe, Lucie Brind A'mour, Bill Pinar, Emily Toth, David England, and especially Rick Moreland--thank you for your patience and guidance over the years. And to the family of Jo Roberts, please know that her gentle words and enthusiasm for literature will remain with me forever.

To my son, Daniel, thank you for the love and companionship and the space that gave me the ability to complete this work. And to my father, thank you for teaching me that hard work is necessary, important, and not always financially rewarding. And I greatly appreciate your faith in dreaming.

I must also thank Abby, the dissertation cat, who helped me so much on those late nights by providing the comforts of his companionship but mostly by kindly sleeping on top of my discarded drafts so that I could distinguish them from my better work.

Above all others, I must thank the women of my life--my own mothers, sisters, and daughters who have taught me and loved me and shown me myself. The mothering, grandmothers, and othermothers that I have been given by Virginia, Catherine, Dot, Faye, Nette, Sis, Martha, and so many others provided me with the strength to believe in this project. Although I have never had a daughter, I know that my students have challenged me and guided me as a daughter would. My sisters--both kin and spirit--Mary, Gay, Mary Ellen, Kelley, Pam, Pepper, Ann, Nora, Melissa, Amy, Emily, and, most of all, Barbara--my editor, my companion, my what-word-should-I-use-here kind of thinker, my warrior princess motivator--you have helped me realize that I cannot and should not accomplish anything alone.

Thank you all for believing in me, encouraging me, and loving me.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication........................................................................................................... ii  

Acknowledgements.......................................................................................... iii 

Abstract............................................................................................................. v  

Chapter 1  
Introduction  
Among Women: Toward a Recursive Model of Relationships....................... 1  

Chapter 2  
Among Misfits, Murderers, and Malcontents:  
Exceptionalities and the Threat of Isolation................................................. 26  

Chapter 3  
Among Sisters: The Power of Two in Developing  
a Women's Community.................................................................................. 46  

Chapter 4  
Among Mothers: Boundaries of Love and Self  
in Maternal Narratives.................................................................................... 97  

Chapter 5  
Among Daughters: Daughter-centricity and  
the Acceptance of Mother Ancestry............................................................ 139  

Bibliography...................................................................................................... 172  

Vita.................................................................................................................... 178
Abstract

This work explores the relationships between and among women in the fiction of Toni Morrison. Morrison's mothers, sisters, and daughters cannot function without the love and support of a community of women. Those characters who abandon or reject this community become lost to their own world. Morrison women, thus, find themselves in and through other women.

The first two chapters establish Morrison's characters in relation to those of other authors in order to show her unique sense of community. Comparing Morrison's work to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and her emphasis on individuality and isolation illustrates Morrison's dependence on community and heritage in building a women's ancestry. Morrison's treatment of isolated individuals who reject the community is examined in chapter two through comparison to characters from the works of such authors as Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. Some of Morrison's pariahs or misfits may have committed crimes which caused them to appear to be apart from the rest of the community while others reject the mother's ancestry in an attempt to find their own. Morrison's characters are not the grotesque figures described by many of these other authors, however, because they function within the society and because the society is a pariah society. These are not mere caricatures used to develop the plot.

Chapter three focuses on Toni Morrison's sisters who help one another find the self and a place in the community. Discovering their role as a sister leads women to appreciate themselves, other women, and their community. Morrison's sisters are of primary importance, since all other women's relationships must strive to reach that level of equality and strength. Chapter four shows that Morrison mothers need other women to help them negotiate
proper boundaries. To realize these boundaries mothers must trust in themselves, the child, and the community. Sisterhood is, thus, of utmost importance to motherhood. In chapter five, I illustrate how Morrison's daughters find themselves through the mother's story. Morrison daughters who do not learn the mother story cannot find the self. Successful Morrison daughters need to move toward sisterhood to become part of community.
Chapter One
Introduction
Among Women: Toward a Recursive Model of Relationships

"Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!" (Beloved 88). These are the words of Baby Suggs, holy, who preaches in the Clearing, reminding her community that they must love themselves—each and every part of themselves.

And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight. So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Beloved 89)

The healing words of Baby Suggs wrap her people in the warmth and harmony of music for their lost souls, giving them the strength to push aside the horrors of their memories of slavery and to begin a new life of loving the self. She provides them with the heart to dance in the sunlight even though "they," the white people of their past, have humiliated them into feeling like animals. This spiritual power of Baby Suggs' words fills her people with life so that they may sing out their love and acceptance of the self and overcome the pain of racial degradation. But Baby Suggs' sermon rings out beyond the little clearing in the woods of Beloved and circles back over time and forward for many generations, washing across the hearts of many of Toni Morrison's characters who need to hear those words, "You got to love it, you!" It is especially her women—her mothers, sisters, and daughters—whom Morrison follows in their need for the inspiration of Baby Suggs' sermon. Sethe, Pecola and Sula, Jade and Ondine
—they all need to learn how to push aside the prejudices against black women to love themselves and in return, pass on that love to others.

Learning self-love is a difficult art for Sethe and many of Toni Morrison's other female characters who struggle in finding a way to "lay it all down." In each of Morrison's novels, women strive to understand and love themselves, but to do so they must also learn to love and appreciate other women and, in turn, their community. These characters often depend on the women of their community to guide them toward this self-love through their love, support, and guidance. Just as Sethe, in order to love herself again, must remember the words of Baby Suggs who has been dead for nine years, so must Denver listen and find strength enough to step off into the world and save herself and her mother. The women of Toni Morrison's fiction need one another in order to love and live in their unbearable worlds. They need the inspiration of their foremothers, the courage of their sisters, and the strength of their daughters in order to battle their demons or, in this case, the ghosts of their children. As Baby Suggs finishes her sermon,

she stood up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh (Beloved 89).

Sethe craves the touch of Baby Suggs and to hear the music of her community once again. "Sethe wanted to be there now. At the least to listen to the spaces that the long-ago singing had left behind. At the most to get a clue from her husband's dead mother as to what she should do with her sword and shield now" (89). Sethe needs the harmony inspired by Baby Suggs but sung by every member of her community in order to find the courage to survive.
Just as a black women's choir supports, highlights, and values each voice in creating the richness and warmth of a beautiful hymn, so must Morrison's women strengthen one another. In singing these harmonies, a soloist may ring out above the other voices—sometimes voicing different words but often setting up the antiphonal, a call and response above the choral parts. The single voice calls out and is answered by the rest of the choir with voice building upon voice until all of the voices join again in one rich harmony made stronger by numbers but also by the variations of individuality. Morrison's communities of women are much like this choir in that each woman may sing out apart from the others as she searches for her own self-definition, but she must always return to the "safe sea of women," the community of strength. When an individual calls out in need, the community should answer and when the community cries out, each individual should respond. The circular wave of voice out of voices, call and response, reaching and returning recreates the harmony of a woman's life through her sisters, mothers and daughters. Marilyn Sanders Mobley describes this image of the choir in her essay "Call and Response: Voice, Community, and Dialogic Structures in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," explaining that the "enactment of the call-and-response tradition illustrates, then, how the responsive voice fosters intersubjectivity and creates community in the context of shared experience" (Mobley "Call . . ." 58). Since the music of Toni Morrison's novels and characters has been a popular topic of discussion, it seems appropriate to use the image of the choir as a metaphor for the way in which the black women's community meshes with voice upon voice in a rich harmony.

This exploration of a woman's role in life and community and the active part played by mothers, sisters, and daughters in this relationship has been the
subject of many feminist discussions. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* has been at the center of that discussion since its 1929 publication. Like Morrison, Woolf explores the role of poverty and lack of ownership in women's lives and how that has limited their creative and productive geniuses. Without the education or freedom that men have enjoyed, women are unable to find their potential artistic forms. Both Morrison and Woolf reveal a need for community and a sense of place in a woman's life, but the emphasis each writer gives to the role of community and place within that life is where their two philosophies diverge. Morrison emphasizes the need for community, while Woolf emphasizes the need for individuality and independence. According to Woolf,

> If we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. (Woolf 118)

In Virginia Woolf's opinion, we "go alone" with "no arm to cling to" in this struggle against the world, and even though each woman draws her life from her "forerunners," she must eventually shut the door to her room and develop her art all alone. Morrison's depiction of community is much different, since each woman must not only accept and appreciate the importance of her community, she actually cannot survive without it. Although Morrison's women do need to find something of their own, they must find it through other women, not in a solitary struggle. Each time that a Morrison woman literally shuts herself into a "room of her own" is actually a sign of her troubled state. Both Sethe and Sula shut themselves away in bedrooms, crawling into the beds of their
foremothers as though trying to return to the womb. Baby Suggs and Eva retreated to those same bedrooms before their daughters—not for safety or security but for escape. In Morrison’s fiction, a woman shutting herself away into a room of her own is never good since it means that she has shut herself off from her community. Morrison’s daughters cannot become successful until they appreciate the mother and her ancestry and learn to return the gift to the community, and she cannot do that if she has locked her doors. Some Morrison daughters learn this lesson and return it to the mother when needed as in the story of Denver, while others struggle against tradition and the mother’s culture as in the case of Jadine. Those daughters who begin to see their mothers as sisters and who learn the mother’s song are most successful in Morrison’s view of womanhood.

In Morrison’s fiction, women view themselves in one of three ways in relation to other women—either as sister, mother, or daughter. Just as two women can have a sisterly relationship even if they are not sisters by blood, so can they share a mother-daughter relationship. Among women, they learn how to love and understand the self, one another, and the community in which they live. By learning to love the self as part of its community, women can love other women and by learning to love other women, they can love the self. These women’s relationships flow recursively and reciprocally within the community, which makes categorizing her female characters extremely difficult. Each woman also fulfills many roles in these novels, and so each character might be examined in a different light according to her many relationships. Morrison’s fictional communities can be seen as the interweaving of relationships between women as sister, mother, or daughter. Each woman is not only a sister, but sometimes a mother and always a daughter as Morrison explores each of these
alliances and the effects on the individual, other women, and the community. Throughout her fictions, Morrison shows that a woman's life cannot be a solitary act—she must acknowledge and appreciate her need for other women in order to survive in these fictional worlds. In the novels of Toni Morrison, women must understand the importance of the choir as they find themselves in and through the voices of other women.

The power of the choir is strongest in sisterhood, the relationship between women in which each individual is viewed as an equal, a life partner to share in both struggles and joys. Morrison's sisters are sometimes related by blood but often are part of another type of unique kinship—friends who find confidence through an other who is like the self. Blood sisters Claudia and Frieda of The Bluest Eye, and First Corinthians and Lena of Song of Solomon as well as friends Sula and Nel of Sula, and Dorcas and Felice of Jazz all share in this sisterly bond, but with their own unique levels of intimacy. A variety of other "sisters" includes the prostitutes of The Bluest Eye and even a temporary black/white sisterhood between Sethe and Amy in Beloved. Morrison also uses triads of women in her sisterly relationships including Sethe, Denver, and Beloved and Pilate, Hagar, and Reba. The strength of these sisterhoods depends on the strength and love of each individual, but the strength of the individual depends upon the support of the sisterhood.

Morrison's sisterhoods develop through a balance of needs in which each woman possesses equal responsibility for the strength and success of the relationship. Susan Koppelman in the afterword to her collection of stories called Women's Friendships describes what she calls the "ethics of reciprocity," a shared intimacy and unselfishness between women friends. As Koppelman explains, "reciprocity involves both giving and receiving. Each must be done
equally" (281). This reciprocity is not as simple as it might seem, however, as the exchanges may not always be of equal value. According to Koppelman, 

\[ \ldots \text{more often what is exchanged is unlike rather than like. It is in understanding the equivalence of value, regardless of the unlikeness of what is offered, that the heart's imagination, or the will to friendship, is most deeply tested.} \] (281)

In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, for instance, Claudia gives Frieda comfort and a solution for eliminating her "ruinedness" and Frieda gives Claudia comfort when she is sick. Koppelman describes the importance of this ability to give and receive and explains how a disequilibrium may result without this careful balance, which would ultimately result in the loss of friendship. Morrison's sisters balance their needs with one sister sometimes protecting or comforting the other. When the balance is destroyed, as in the case of Sula and Nel, so is the friendship.

Separating the discussion of Morrison's sisters from her mothers and daughters is a difficult task, especially since the debate over their individual roles has been part of a heated discussion for some time now. The strength of sisters is one of the most powerful relationships between and among women in Toni Morrison's fiction. Many feminist theorists, however, question this power of sisters, since they see sisterly strength as a diminution of the mother's power. Marianne Hirsch calls the attention given to friendship the "fantasy of sisterhood."

Throughout the 1970s, the metaphor of sisterhood, of friendship or of surrogate motherhood has been the dominant model for female and feminist relationships. To say that "sisterhood is powerful," however, is to isolate feminist discourse within one generation and to banish feminists who are mothers to the "mother-closet."

(Hirsch, *Mother* 164)

Katherine Payant, who bases much of her discussion on the works of Marianne
Hirsch and Nancy Chodorow, echoes Hirsch by claiming that "one negative effect of the idea of 'sisterhood' has been to silence the voices of mothers. If we have 'sisters,' then we don't need mothers" (Payant 85). Payant supports her claim by analyzing several novels of the 1970's including some of Morrison's works. In her analysis,

... most of the novels of the 1970s gave little attention to the relationships of mothers and daughters or made the protagonist's mother one of her problems. These mothers, traditional women of the 1940s and 1950s, are poor role models in the eyes of their daughters. As 'castrated' representatives of the patriarchy, they are the socializers, the 'corset tighteners' and 'foot binders.'

(Payant 55)

Payant envisions daughters who rebel against the mothers who have accepted their own position in patriarchy. These same daughters may be drawn to friends who offer the nurturing they need when they have rejected the mother. Although there is some truth to Payant's claims in regard to Morrison's 1973 novel Sula in which Sula chooses Nel when she is rejected by her own mother, for the most part, Morrison's sisters accept and welcome their mothers into their lives, such as Pilate, Reba, and Hagar of Song of Solomon. Many Morrison sisters even include a mother into the sisterhood, treating her as an equal. Although Mrs. MacTeer of The Bluest Eye might be blamed as a sort of "footbinder" since she perpetuates the gift of white, blue-eyed dolls, she is certainly not condemned to the "mother closet" since she is crucial to modeling the importance of female friendship to her daughters.

Many scholars see the mother/daughter relationship as one in which the mother plays a dominant role at all times, creating a disequilibrium in the relationship. Payant claims that friends share in an equality that mothers and daughters cannot know:
Whether real sisters or friends, the pair may nurture each other in a maternal sense and yet provide reciprocity and equality not found in the mother/daughter relationship. . . . Friendship—"sisterhood"—fulfills the fantasy of the mother/daughter relationship we all long for—the mother who nurtures and is a friend whom we can also mother, but without the power struggles between actual mothers and daughters.

In this view, feminists see sister relationships in opposition to mother/daughter relationships, especially since daughters are often rebelling against the patriarchal constraints accepted by mothers. Morrison's 1977 Song of Solomon certainly refutes this belief, with Pilate, Hagar, and Reba becoming sisters rather than grandmother, mother, and daughter in their shared women's triad. Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs share a similar sisterhood in Beloved.

Comprehending the role of motherhood in the development of sisterhood is important to understanding Morrison's relationships among women. Chodorow believes that mothers are, in fact, the basis for friendships between women (O'Connor 156). Even Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born states, "Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge—transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood" (225). Susan Koppelman agrees in the introduction to Women's Friendships, claiming that women usually will not have close friends if their mothers did not (Koppelman xxiv). Orbach and Eichenbaum expand upon this idea by claiming that women learn the need for other women from the mother (Orbach and Eichenbaum 46-47). These theories can be seen in The Bluest Eye's Frieda and Claudia, whose example of women's friendships comes from their mother and her friends, just as Morrison herself had the example of her own mother's friends to show her this importance of sisterly bonds. Conversely, Pecola's mother has no friends—no women's community to serve as example for Pecola, who remains
sisterless all of her life. The voices of Morrison's sisters, therefore, not only do not exclude their mothers' voices, but actually sometimes depend on them. Sisters learn the art of giving and receiving by viewing the mother as a model and sometimes as a friend herself. Morrison's Pilate and even Sethe serve as sister-mothers, while Mrs. MacTeer demonstrates the need for a shared life by relying on her friends.

In some cases, friends or sisters may play out the role of mother and daughter with one sister becoming stronger or more assertive than the other. According to Orbach and Eichenbaum, friendships mimic aspects of the mother-daughter relationship (46-47).

Woman to woman relationships duplicate aspects of the mother-daughter relationship, as well as holding out the promise to each of the friends involved that it will repair some of the hurt and difficulties that reside in that relationship. Consequently in adult female friendships we can observe how frequently one or both members in a friendship have an unconscious wish to merge with the other person, to be 'mothered' and cared for, to receive the nurturing that they continue to crave. (64)

Sula and Nel follow this pattern with both women searching for what they cannot get from their mothers. Nurturing is a part of their friendship in that each woman mothers the other through difficult situations, such as the death of Chicken Little and the confrontation with bullies, but those roles change as needed. Pat O'Connor in *Friendships Between Women* claims that a mother often becomes a woman's best friend when there are few other choices (O'Connor 156). This would be true in Denver's isolation due to her mother's crime, so that Sethe becomes more like a friend to her. Toni Morrison escapes the constraints suggested by Hirsch and Payant by creating some sisters who not only accept, but also include their mothers in their friendships. The
relationships involving Pilate, Reba, and Hagar and even Ruth, Corinthians, and Lena of Song of Solomon reveal a sisterly bond that crosses generations. Morrison shows a woman's need for a sister giving the strength to overcome the constraints of mother/daughter power struggles, allowing mother to become sister.

Although Morrison's "sisters" range in age from pre-teens to aging grandmothers, perhaps the most intriguing of these characters are her adolescents, who, since they appear in each of the six novels, must also be intriguing to Morrison herself. From The Bluest Eye's Pecola to Jazz's Dorcas, these young girls stumble or strut toward womanhood in a desperate attempt to understand, love, and accept themselves. All of Morrison's sisters are not adolescents, yet she often depicts them as behaving like adolescents when in their most sisterly scenes. The sisterly relationships in these young girls' lives often give them the strength to face whatever odds are thrown against them. The Bluest Eye centers on the lives of Frieda and Claudia, two sisters struggling to find their place in a Shirley Temple world where black girls are often considered ugly and unimportant. Sula and Nel of Sula share some of these same problems, but with the support of one another, they are able to find strength when even their mothers do not like them. In Song of Solomon, First Corinthians and Magdalene are sisters who play somewhat minor roles in this male protagonist book, but their frustrations as young females with no voice or power are still very clear. Hagar shares her adolescence with Reba, her mother, and Pilate, her grandmother, in a sisterly relationship, often acting like three girls with few responsibilities interested only in immediate pleasures. In Beloved, Denver, who desperately seeks companionship, struggles with the extra inconveniences of a very possessive and powerful ghost sister, and in
Jazz, Felice shares in the friendship and death of Dorcas, a young girl who dies for love. Of the sisterless adolescents Tar Baby's Jade, an exotic creature whose outward control hides the questions she has about her own success, has no sister and spends most of her life alone and wondering how to fit in with her community. And, of course, Pecola of The Bluest Eye remains tormented by the severe isolation of her dysfunctional family. Each of these young women shares in the common search for love and happiness. Each girl in her journey to self-worth is dependent on her sisters for support and courage in order to move forward and escape the slavery of her world. They each need a sister for the acceptance necessary in order to face the oppressive facets of their society.

With sisterhood as the important link to selfhood and community, Morrison's mothers actually depend on their ability to understand the need for sisters. Morrison mothers cannot mother alone. Whether they find strength from a community of other mothers or from the memories of a rich ancestry—or sometimes both as in Sethe's case—they build on the power of other women. But Morrison mothers are not always included in the category of friend, especially since some mothers maim or even murder their children. These mothers often find themselves unable to trust in the world and feel that it is unsuitable for their "best thing," while some are unable to trust the child that is unsuitable for the world. Morrison shows that mothers who are not able to love themselves cannot love their children, passing on the wrong story to future generations. Morrison mothers, through the help of their community, learn to negotiate the proper boundaries between mother and child. By learning to love and honor themselves and by trusting in the world as a safe place, they can learn to let go of the child.
Each of Morrison's six novels centers some attention on motherhood, beginning with the contrast between Mrs. Breedlove and Mrs. MacTeer of *The Bluest Eye*. These two figures represent Morrison's depiction of a woman trying to survive without community in contrast to a woman surrounded by friends and family. In *Sula*, Morrison contrasts Eva, a mother who murders her son and sacrifices her legs for her children, with Helene, a woman who rejects her past and embraces white ideals of beauty. *Song of Solomon*’s Ruth struggles with her own insecurities while Pilate stands as one of Morrison's strongest women. *Beloved*’s Sethe is Morrison's most complex mother—the mother who kills her child out of love. Just as *Beloved* is filled with stories of mothering, so is *Jazz* filled with stories of motherlessness. As Morrison explores the ability of these mothers to learn about loving themselves through loving their children, she also shows how the community must play an active role in the lives of each of these women.

One of the most complicated relationships in Morrison's representation of mothers is the relationship between races in the historically-based phenomenon of the “othermother.” An othermother is a woman who assists or takes the place of the bloodmother in raising children. Many of these black women have complete access to the lives and secrets of white people while at the same time living complete and full lives in their own black community—sometimes caring for white homes and families better than their own, as in the case of Pauline of *The Bluest Eye*, sometimes fighting against their servant roles as does Ondine of *Tar Baby*. Morrison’s othermothers appear in one of two roles—either as a black mother raising white children or as a black mother raising the children for another black mother. Characters such as Ondine and Pauline and True Belle raise or help raise white children, but each takes on that...
responsibility very differently from the other. Morrison reveals intricate complexities with no easy categories or stereotypes in the role of the servant mother, as shown through the difficulties explored in the character of Ondine who struggles against racial boundaries in giving advice to Margaret, the white employer who torments her own child. Pauline’s role is no less complex, however, in that she actually chooses to love the white child in her care more than her own. True Belle, the grandmother to Violet from Jazz, worships the white child that she assists in raising similarly to Pauline, but the difference here is that True Belle is enslaved and has little choice in deciding which child receives her attention.

By analyzing the effects of these othermother relationships between blacks and whites, the strength of Morrison’s black women and their need for other women can be seen even more completely. According to Brenda O. Daly and Maureen T. Reddy in the introduction to Narrating Mothers, black women are a part of a system of “community othermothers” who “take public responsibility for all black children” (8). Daly and Reddy claim that this system goes against the laws of patriarchy.

Motherhood under the law of the white father requires that the mother love her own children above other children, and that she see her own children’s claims as... more valid than the claims of other children. Seeing motherhood as a collective responsibility leads mothers to see other mothers’ children as being equally entitled to claims on mothers’ care as their own children are. (8)

What Daly and Reddy do not discuss is the responsibility of black othermothers in raising white children too. White patriarchal fathers have demanded that these othermothers treat white children above their own, so the laws of patriarchy have created conflicts in mothering. Those conflicts in mothering, of course, greatly affect the role of the daughter in Morrison’s women’s stories.
since the daughter's story is connected always to the mother and, sometimes, to the sister.

Daughterhood is Morrison's link between past and future, for these are the women who must pass on the story, but they must first learn the story from their mothers. These daughters learn how to succeed in the world with the knowledge of the past as well as the dedication of the future. According to Virginia Woolf from *A Room of One's Own*, a woman must have money and a room of her own in order to tell her story, neither of which are possessions of these young ladies.

While the focus of this study centers around the relationships between Morrison's women, other issues affect any study of Morrison. Since Morrison's relationships sometimes cross over racial boundaries, the issues of race relations cannot be ignored. According to Renita Weems, Morrison's books are influenced by a white world even when there are no white characters present (Weems 103). Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter partially because of the torment he received from white men who taunted and teased him while he had sex with a young black girl during his adolescence. The black community of *Sula* lives in the Bottom because white people put them there and many ended up buried alive in the tunnel that they were not allowed to build. In *Song of Solomon*, Not Doctor Street symbolizes the negatives, the reactions against the powerful white world. Long after their slavery, Sethe and Paul D and Ella and Stamp Paid continue working through the pain caused by their white oppressors. Throughout Morrison's work, even without a physical presence, the white world continues to have a physical and mental effect on the black. Morrison's depictions of these relationships reveal the intricacies of the interconnections between blacks and whites. Although this is primarily a study
of the relationships between and among women—not a racial study—these black women are, of course, continually affected by their position in society and the prejudices brought against them because of skin color, which means that the relationships between those women are also affected by race relations, particularly due to white patriarchal conventions. But race is not the primary factor in Morrison's women's stories, since most of these relationships develop within the black community rather than across racial lines, and even though race prejudice is very much a part of their lives, these women have relationships with one another that are not directly influenced by whites. Sethe's entire story, for instance, is affected by the torments brought on by white men, but Morrison's focus is on what happens to her and her relationships with other women after the fact. The story, in other words, is about relationships between women who may be influenced by the results of racial prejudice, but this racial prejudice is not their primary story. The black women's choir may sing about hardship and injustice, but it must still learn the intricate harmonies among women's voices, so the choir is the means through which these women learn to survive.

When her women's relationships cross racial lines, Morrison deconstructs the stereotypes that have been established by many white sentimentalists of the past—especially in regard to the black mother figure. Comprehending Morrison's women must involve some understanding of the roles that she is fighting to preserve by bringing fact into fiction. One of Morrison's aims in her depiction of black women is to destroy the stereotypes and preserve the history. Each of her characters explores the complexities of black mothers who have so often been shown as mere caricatures. Barbara Christian, in her Black Feminist Criticism, describes the portrayal of black women characters as stereotypes in southern white literature. The most popular
of these figures is the mammy, the "fat, nurturing, religious, kind, above all strong" woman who takes care of white, southern children. The mammy must be "plump and have big breasts and arms" (2). In Christian's analysis, the mammy is the direct opposite of the ideal white woman who must be fragile and incapable of doing hard work. Of course, the white woman could not cook or scrub floors, nor nurse and bring up the children. The mammy is unable to do any harm and is very giving. This is the portrayal of the mammy figure in much white literature, but in the slave narratives the mammy becomes more powerful and certainly more threatening to whites. According to Christian, "she is cunning, prone to poisoning her master, and not at all content with her lot" (5). Christian uses Sojourner Truth as example but stresses that she was certainly not the only mammy who "fought to protect her own children or who rose up against slavery. Mammies kicked, fought, connived, plotted . . . to throw off the chains of bondage. Mammy saw herself as a mother, but to her that role embodied a certain dignity and responsibility, rather than a physical debasement" (5). In Women. Race and Class, Angela Y. Davis explains that, contrary to the mammy myth, "seven out of eight slaves, men and women alike, were field workers" (5). Davis also explains that black women were not thought of as mothers as much as "breeders" during the years of slavery and they received no rights of motherhood since their children were the property of slave owners and could be sold away at any time (7). Davis, citing the works of Herbert Aptheker and Sarah Grimke, explains the active role black mothers played in resisting slavery, including poisoning their masters and defending their families. They resisted sexual assaults and planned and executed escapes (19). These slave women worked alongside the men completing the same tasks.
Morrison’s depiction of mother figures encompasses all of these historical accounts, revealing not only the physical strength of many of these women but also their intellectual prowess. E. Franklin Frazier’s accounts in his 1939 book called *The Negro Family* give evidence for both Sethe’s self-sacrifice and her own mother’s coldness in relation to her children. Slavery seems to have created both attitudes. Sethe’s tortures can be traced directly to Frazier’s book including the mingled flow of breast milk and blood (Morrison, *Beloved* 152) and the manner in which she was beaten during pregnancy. "They dug a hole for my stomach so as not to hurt the baby" (202). Davis, in her essay written six years before *Beloved*’s publication, refers to the true story of Margaret Garner, the inspiration for Sethe, who after killing her daughter said, “now she would never know what a woman suffers as a slave. . . . I will go singing to the gallows rather than be returned to slavery" (21). Of course, the irony is that Garner was returned to slavery, in spite of her wishes to die. Historical records reveal what Morrison has tried to show—a community of caring women who supported one another through the worst imaginable nightmares. The physical strength of these mothers is one of the qualities that Morrison tries to reveal through characters such as Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Pilate, but she also depicts their tremendous mental endurance and protectiveness of family that is based on these historical records. Morrison’s mothers through the help of community fight for their families against impossible odds. Baby Suggs, Sethe, Ondine, and Pauline each destroy the image of the white man’s mammy, giving her, instead, her rightful historical strength. Morrison shatters the stereotype of a black servant, a mother figure with no life of her own.

Morrison’s use of othermothers also has historical basis. For many years past, particularly in the South, white children have had black “mothers.” These
black women worked in white homes as domestics, cleaning and cooking but primarily raising the children. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich describes her feelings for her "black mother," the woman who worked as a nurse to her during early childhood. She remembers the nurse caring for her "tenderly and intimately" (Rich 254) and explains the great love she held for this black woman of her past. Although Rich's focus is on her own memory of loving an "unworthy," she insists that she fought the feelings because the nurse was a woman, not because she was black. For whatever reason, however, the memories of her black nurse evaded her. "For years, she had drifted out of reach, in my searches backward through time, exactly as the double silence of sexism and racism intended her to do. She was meant to be utterly annihilated" (255). Here Rich suggests a feeling symbolic of the white South's attitude toward these black mothers and their place in history. "She was meant to be utterly annihilated." Whites have often failed to give credit to these black women for establishing an important link between people divided according to race, and even when this honor is restored, the black woman's feelings are rarely discussed. Countless white southern authors have written about the relationship of the black servant to a white family. In *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers describes the support and love given to a white adolescent girl by her black maid. Harper Lee writes of a similar relationship in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These books all reveal the warmth and love that crosses racial boundaries through the care of these black "other mothers" for white children. But McCullers, Lee, and many others do not consider the servant's view of the situation. The black mother's perspective, her sense of place in the white world, her struggles to return to her black community each day--these concerns are not addressed by many white
authors. Morrison depicts the complexities of this relationship between black mothers and their white children through the characters of Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* and True Belle in *Jazz*. Both of these are characters who love the white children in their charge above their own black children. They are almost completely taken by the patriarchal constraints that require them to abandon their own children in order to love the golden hair and blue eyes of their employer's children.

In destroying this image of the mammy, the othermother who raises white children and serves as confidant and devoted servant all of her life, Morrison develops black servants who are a complicated assortment—some who seem quite content in their servant role while others fight for escape. These are all women who face the struggles of motherhood but who have the extra strain of racial tension as they must also mother white children. In *The Bluest Eye* Pauline is Morrison's depiction of a servant, an othermother, who seems much like those in stories by many white authors, including Adrienne Rich. Morrison, however, shows the effects of this woman's stereotypical role as "mammy" on the black woman's own family. In *Song of Solomon*, First Corinthians' entrance into the world of a servant reveals the loss of pride often faced by these women. In *Tar Baby*, Ondine is, of course, the ideal servant, but her relationship with Margaret crosses the lines of servant/master at least for a short time and Ondine is not at all "the happy darky" described by white authors. In *Beloved*, both Sethe and Baby Suggs must slave in the master's home while worrying about their own children who are often left unattended. In *Jazz* both Alice and True Belle and even Violet work for whites but in very different servant roles. In all of these characters, Morrison shows the conflicts between races but also within each individual who struggles with the strain of leading a double life.
Racial lines may also be crossed in the name of sisterhood in Morrison's fiction. That double life which begins to show the relationship that can develop between women of different races is best described in Skin Deep: Black Women and White Women Write About Race, where Dorothy Gilliam quotes Lorraine Hansberry,

Our lives have been intertwined with white women—in the kitchen, in the schoolroom, in the marketplace, and in the volunteer board room. We probably know Miss Ann better than Mister Charlie does, and surely far better than our black brothers do... The roles we have played in society give black women a special vantage point of observation" (Golden and Shreve 261).

Of course, that special vantage point has its special problems too. Ondine really knows so much more about her employer, Margaret's, life than does Margaret's husband that this "perfect" servant threatens her job and certainly her friendship with the Street family. Historical studies reveal a striking contrast between these strong black females and their white counterparts. According to most research, "southern womanhood was born in the imaginations of white slaveholding men. Thus southern womanhood was linked directly to fundamental southern questions of race, class, and sex" (Jones 8). White southern women represented everything good about humanity. "More than just a fragile flower, the image of the southern lady represents her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection" (Jones 9). Other studies support the relation between women and slaves as does Anne Firor Scott in her book called The Southern Lady. She states that,

...in the antebellum South, slavery had a good deal to do with the ideal of the southern lady. Because they owned slaves and thus maintained a traditional landowning aristocracy, southerners tenaciously held on to the patriarchal family structure. (Scott 16)

These white women were weak, submissive creatures. "From earliest
childhood girls were trained to the ideals of perfection and submission" (Scott 7). When they married, "this marvelous creation was described as a submissive wife whose reason for being was to love, honor, obey, and occasionally amuse her husband, to bring up his children and manage his household" (Scott 4). In Beloved, Morrison draws from this striking historical contrast between black and white women of the South, but the weak, submissive white woman's relationship with a strong black woman is best seen in Tar Baby. Even though Ondine is not a slave and this is not a story of the South, she and Margaret Street are usefully comparable to the historical role of the black/white, servant/master relationship. Ondine has knowledge that would be helpful to Margaret but is afraid to share that information with her, for fear of losing her job. Morrison uses history to try to examine this role more closely and to see the inner workings of this sister relationship that tries to develop across racial boundaries.

The friendship that develops between Amy and Sethe also functions as a type of sisterhood that reaches past racial constraints while the relationship between Ondine and Margaret is more complicated. Amy is part of the women's community that Sethe comes to accept and value, just as Sethe is part of Amy's. In this instance, sisterhood develops in spite of racial bounds and, in fact, requires that both women recognize the similarities in the plight of women of both races. In the case of Ondine and Margaret, race and social stature prevent the friendship from developing fully. Through these relationships, Morrison illustrates the complexities of racial divisions and the effects on her mothers, sisters, and daughters. So, in developing the complexities of relationships between black and white women, Morrison uses this heritage and history to provide firm ground for her mothers, sisters, and daughters.
The structure of this study will center around these three types of women's relationships—sisters, mothers, and daughters—focusing on how women view themselves in relation to other women, but there are also women who, for one reason or another, do not feel accepted by other women. Sometimes they remain completely apart from the mother, sister, and daughter experience or sometimes they purposefully pull away from those relationships. Understanding Morrison's community depends on a close look at the misfit or freak—the woman who does not fit in with the community. The reasons for the feelings of displacement for these women are sometimes caused by their society's views—especially patriarchal definitions of beauty and womanhood—or their own views about their roles in society. Many Morrison characters experience these feelings at one time or another, some for longer periods of time than others. Her adolescent characters sometimes feel like freaks because of their physical appearance while other characters commit crimes that set them apart from other members of society, such as Sethe who is actually shunned for her reaction to her crime rather than the crime itself. In Morrison, many characters have trouble finding a place in society—finding a place of their own, but sometimes it is sharing their freakish conditions that gives these women a sense of community, such as the relationship that develops between Violet and Alice Manfred in Jazz. In Morrison, absence is as important as presence in that women without community influence others to build community.

For the purposes of this study, each chapter will be devoted to a different type of women's relationship. Chapter Two will explore the portrayal of some Morrison characters as pariahs or freaks; Chapter Three will discuss sisterhood; Chapter Four, motherhood; and Chapter Five, daughterhood, but as has been stated, Morrison's representations of relationships between and among women
cannot be so easily categorized. This cannot be a linear study of set boundaries any more than Morrison's women can be separated exclusively into mothers, sisters, and daughters. Instead, this analysis must follow the recursive ebb and flow of a feminine dialogue like women's voices in a rich spiritual. Many women actually fit into all three of these categories, but since sisterhood is the strongest and most important relationship for Morrison's women, some discussion of its function will be important to each of these three chapters. Some attention to the tensions between races will also be important in showing Morrison’s belief in the power of sisterhood to sometimes overcome racial patriarchal traditions. The story of those women who do not find their way into these relationships must also be told, for Morrison is clear in showing that some women do not find a place in the choir. What happens to those who do not find the healing powers of mother, sister, or daughter? What happens to those who reject these relationships? What happens to the women who do not learn how to “lay it all down” and love themselves or one another?

Morrison's depiction of the power of community shows that the women's choir strengthens each individual voice as well as the community as a whole in rich, harmonious song. This women's choir is very different from a Greek chorus since these women do not simply comment on the action but instead become part of the story. Each woman must find something of her own, perhaps not a room, but at least a place or a “best thing” to be. But each woman must also become a part of the larger women’s choir in order to survive, giving to others as she has received. Just as the words of Baby Suggs must guide Sethe and Denver, so must the women’s community guide each of these characters in their struggles against poverty and social injustice. Just as Sethe learns the
importance of welcoming the wave of women's voices, so must her foremothers and children.
Chapter Two
Among Misfits, Murderers, and Malcontents: Exceptionalities and the Threat of Isolation

"The thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely" writes Lorraine Hansberry in her work To Be Young, Gifted and Black (Hansberry 148). The exceptionalities of Toni Morrison's women include a variety of physical abnormalities as well as personality traits that make them lonely and apart from the rest of the world. While loneliness due to exceptionality is certainly a part of Morrison's fiction, her lonely characters are not outcasts of society but functioning members of the community. Morrison's community of women accepts and loves its members as long as those members understand, love, and value the community. Only those women who feel that they are powerful and independent without other women or those women who do not love themselves enough to feel that their voices are needed in the choir are rejected by the community. Physical or mental abnormalities are not enough to make these women into outcasts, and these exceptionalities sometimes make them even more a part of the community.

Through the love and strength of other women, Toni Morrison's sisters, mothers, and daughters give each other the ability to believe in themselves and the future. They need and love one another, depend on each other for support and confidence, and although many of these women have committed what most would label dangerous, unlawful, or even insane acts, they are still accepted members of the community—still a part of one another. Throughout her career, Morrison has shown that only those women who do not recognize the need for other women and who do not understand the basics of their culture remain lost souls. Morrison shows that even when a woman commits an act that the
community dislikes, she still remains a functioning member of the community—never a social outcast, regardless of how serious the crime. There are no pariahs in Toni Morrison's village view of community, but there are those who—at least temporarily and sometimes permanently—become lost to the women's choir, the support system and harmony of life.

Of course, not all of Morrison's women feel that they are a part of the community. Understanding Morrison's mothers, daughters, and sisters and the relationships that develop between and among these women depends on also understanding the women who do not fit in—those who remain apart from society, some temporarily and some for all of their lives. Even when Morrison women lose their way and remain apart from the rest of society, they still function as a part of the community. Fully understanding Morrison's women and the power of their relationships requires a study of those women who are without this women's network of friends and family—the women who either remain or become loners.

Morrison explores the many types of characters who, in other literary works, have been labeled "freaks," "displaced persons," "grotesque," but in her novels, these freakish qualities and grotesque acts are understood and forgiven—not portrayed as mere functional plot elements. The masterful character of Boo Radley, for instance, from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* has few lines but is of ultimate importance to the plot and to the development of every other character in the story. Mayella's father commits the same act as Pecola's, but he is a mere stereotype around which the rest of the book turns—not a real man with a past as is Cholly Breedlove. Similarly, Flannery O'Connor's "displaced persons," such as the misfit of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and Carson McCuller's hunchback of "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe'" are
characters who are of utmost importance to other characters but who are not fully developed themselves. They often provide the point around which the conflict develops and sometimes operate as a sounding board for a primary character as does the mute in McCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. These grotesque misfits, however, operate as part of the plot in these fictions rather than as primary characters. In Morrison, the grotesque is part of life and, in fact, is often part of each person's life—not a separate entity to battle against.

One thing that is different about Morrison's use of freakish characters is her escape from the stereotypical phenomenon of "deformed heroes"—my label for a pattern established in many novels which involves a deformed character becoming not only the center of attention but also the counselor/confidant or preacher to all the townspeople. In the works of Carson McCullers, Singer is the deaf mute in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* who "listens" to the hardships of everyone around him. Cousin Lymon is the hunchback in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe'* who becomes worshiped as entertainer and storyteller to his town. In a similar fashion, Flannery O'Connor writes of many crazed men who become preachers with crowds of eager listeners. Morrison has a few of these characters herself in her earlier novels. Soaphead Church appears in *The Bluest Eye* and Shadrack in *Sula*, and they take on some of the same characteristics as McCullers and O'Connor freaks. They are strange men who somehow attract people to gather around them as followers. People listen to them as they would the Ancient Mariner, captured by their words. These are the characters that become labeled grotesque. But Morrison escapes the mold of the grotesque by focusing most of her fiction on characters who are quite functional in society, but who have committed or continue to commit some freakish act which might cause them to be labeled abnormal.
Of the women who possess physical exceptionalities, many are not particularly hampered by their condition as much as they are somehow enriched or changed by the experience. The physical change in each woman’s life is not as important to Morrison’s storylines as the resulting mental condition of each woman. These physical conditions very often involve a lame or even missing leg, symbolizing a loss of freedom or a lack of completeness. Pilate’s lack of a navel and the varying episodes of color prejudice show how physical differences in each individual can change a woman’s entire life, but what Morrison shows is that the condition itself is not nearly so important as the individual’s and community’s reaction to her exceptionality. That reaction is of ultimate importance to each woman as she learns her position in the relationship with other women and her community.

Included in the list of Morrison women who have leg or foot injuries is Pauline of *The Bluest Eye*, Eva of *Sula*, Ondine of *Tar Baby*, and Baby Suggs of *Beloved*. While Pauline’s injured foot, maimed from a rusty nail since her childhood, taints her entire life, it is her feelings about the foot rather than the injury itself that affects her relationship with other women. No one seems to notice the foot nearly so much as Pauline’s own poor self-esteem and it is that insecurity with herself and other people that ultimately affects her daughter’s life. Pauline remains trapped by the lame foot and later a rotten tooth, unable to break free of these physical constraints on her personality. Eva’s crippled condition is an entirely different situation. First of all, many people of her community believe that Eva crippled herself to get money for her family—a very different situation from Pauline. While Pauline is trapped by her deformity, Eva is believed to be taking control of her life. As the community shuns Pauline for her lack of strength, it opens its arms to Eva for her sense of purpose. People
flock around Eva as she sits in her bedroom in her makeshift wheelchair where she rules all that she sees, while they shun Pauline who remains alone in her apartment until she learns to escape to the movies. Eva seems to become stronger and more appealing to her community with her injury, while Pauline becomes weaker and more timid. Eva does, however, become trapped by her lameness when she cannot save her daughter from burning to death.

Both Ondine and Baby Suggs are crippled because of hard work. Theirs is the limp of women who have spent too many years carrying the weight of the white people for whom they work. Each of these women limps through her work days, her pain a reminder of her toil. Each woman is proud of the work she has done and each is respected for her strength. Baby Suggs is reminded, of course, of her years in slavery and the entrapment she experienced from knowing that she could not run even if she had the chance. Ondine feels trapped as well in the knowledge that she is too old to look for a new job and to have to get adjusted to new employers. Other women in Morrison have other physical deformities such as Sethe’s nursemaid, Nan, who is missing an arm in *Beloved*. Her abnormality symbolizes yet another of the marks of slavery. The effects of lame and missing legs and arms for Morrison’s women are, thus, crippling in more ways than one.

Of course, Pilate’s lack of a navel results in her being shunned but also respected by the community, as they believe her to be unnatural but at the same time a curious anomaly. Her missing navel, which Morrison admits to be a physical impossibility, separates her from her community so that she creates her own triad community. Her abnormality represents her spiritualness and connection to the maternal, and because of her exceptionality she becomes a sort of spiritual guide to anyone in need. People wait outside her home,
listening for answers. Like the deaf mute in McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, she becomes a sort of confidant figure, but Pilate takes an active role in giving answers and seems to bear a true spiritual connectedness, not just an imagined one. McCullers’ character, Singer, cannot even hear the problems people tell him much less give them real answers. His powers are imagined by his friends while Pilate’s spiritual wisdom is very real.

In spite of these physical deformities, Morrison’s women are not considered freaks. These injuries become a part of their personalities—not separate abnormalities, but part of their very being. Unlike Flannery O’Connor’s peg-legged Joy “Hulga” from “Good Country People,” these women are not freakish souls trapped in haylofts by Bible salesmen. They are realistic women with ordinary lives—not stereotypes of abnormality. It is not Pauline’s limp that makes her isolated but her reaction to her limp. Morrison incorporates these physical differences into the personalities of each woman.

In addition to physical exceptionalities, many Morrison women experience mental abnormalities. Of the Morrison women who might be considered abnormal due to mental disabilities each functions, for the most part, without interfering with the community’s wellbeing. While Jazz’s Violet does sit in the middle of the street and even steals a baby on one occasion, her actions are, for the most part, harmless. Cutting the face of her husband’s already dead girlfriend is forgiven by most of the community. Many blame her mother, Rose Dear, for the bouts of insanity suffered by Violet. The child of a suicide is expected to have difficulties adjusting in the world, and so Violet’s actions are accepted and even forgiven by her community. According to the narrator, “the children of suicides are hard to please and quick to believe no one loves them because they are not really here” (4). Violet, herself, feels isolated because of
her actions and almost understands her own mother's suicide. She holds onto her sanity as does Sethe even though both women contemplate the ease of escaping the cruelties of life. Joe's mother, Wild, in Jazz is another character who functions even in her insanity. Like Pecola, Wild is used by the community to show young girls what could happen to them. Both women spend their days in isolation, unable to fit into the structure of the community but always on the outskirts as symbols of nonconformity.

Another category for Morrison characters who do not exactly fit in with the rest of the community are those who commit what might be considered evil acts. The primary Morrison character who fits this category is Sula. According to Patrick Bjork, "Sula's rebellious acts predictably place her in a pariah position; all her attempts at an experientially guiltless and egoless life ironically lead her not to identity or community, but to an ultimate sense of solitude and isolation. And thus she learns this truth: an experimental life, especially for a woman, leads only to ostracism, loneliness, and ultimately to a descent..." (Bjork 77). Why would Morrison imply that a woman is unable to lead an experimental life and still be a part of the community? Isn't that what Pilate does? Is Sula truly a pariah? Although its members may not like her, she does have a function within the community. Rubenstein sees both Pecola and Sula as pariahs because "one female becomes an outcast against whom the group reasserts its values" (Rubenstein 152). Payant, however, calls these women including the prostitutes and Sula "not quite pariahs, they exist in the 'wild zone' where human needs for conformity are ignored" (Payant 175). Morrison herself speaks of the eccentricities of people from the community in which she grew up and how there was still respect for "the survival of the village" (Taylor-Guthrie 125). According to Morrison's view of the community's relation to Sula, "They
protected themselves from her, but she was part of the community" (125). So, Morrison sees the relationship as being more complicated than Bjork does. In an interview with Claudia Tate, she describes her perception of a pariah within a pariah community.

The black community is a pariah community. Black people are pariahs. The civilization of black people that lives apart from but in juxtaposition to other civilizations is a pariah relationship. . . . But a community contains pariahs within it that are very useful for the conscience of that community.

(Rubenstein 159)

So, if Sula is a pariah, she is a pariah of a pariah community and she plays an important role in that community.

In Morrison's work, the character of Sula becomes an "other woman" when she sleeps with her best friend's husband. She is oddly accepted by her community for what she is until she puts her grandmother in a nursing home and sleeps with Jude, only to dump him for a series of other men. She is soon blamed for every death and mishap in the town. Her mother slept with many men, so it seems expected that Sula will too. She causes quite a stir in the small town but mostly between her and her best friend, Nel. But even after the rest of the community has rejected Sula, Nel comes to her sickbed to help relieve the pain or maybe just to try to understand the difference between right and wrong. Sula remains strong even in this deathbed scene, never regretting the paths she has chosen or the effect she has had on the world around her.

Dorcas in Jazz is a character similar to Sula, but she does not fare quite as well in her role as the "other woman" since she is not only murdered by her lover, but she is also cut in the face by his wife at the funeral. Dorcas's unnecessary death is caused not only by her own refusal to go to a hospital but also the community that allows her to die while surrounded by friends too afraid
to call the police. Dorcas herself only wants to sleep. The novel, beginning with
her death, is not only the gradual unfolding of Dorcas' story, but primarily the
tale of Violet and Joe, who survive in spite of their pain. The city nicknames her
Violent and looks with sympathy at Joe's suffering.

Both novels explore issues of passion and violence in love, and both tell
tragic stories in which the black community helplessly sits back and watches as
the action unfolds. But Sula has a function within her society. She is her
community's black sheep, the bad girl who kills children, steals husbands, and
puts her grandmother in a rest home. Because of her actions, people treated
their family members with respect and decency so as not to be compared to
Sula. Sula understands and appreciates her function. Dorcas never does.
She never thinks beyond her own needs, her immediate pleasure—even in
death.

Morrison also calls Sula's community "nurturing" because there is no
where else in the world that she could live "without being harmed" (Rigney 54).
Morrison explains that a black community accepts evil as part of life. "They try to
protect themselves from evil, of course, but they don't have that puritanical thing
which says if you see a witch, then burn it" (Taylor-Guthrie 8). Morrison says of
Sula that she was "interested in what it means to be an outlaw" (Koenen 71).
Barbara Rigney describes Sula as an artist who is both pariah and witch and
claims that she "purifies the community" (Rigney 55); because she is an artist,
she must be a pariah. According to Rigney, the pariah as artist is part of the
community as artist, using Jadine, Pauline, Baby Suggs, and Pilate as other
examples of this phenomenon. Although Morrison's view of artists without art
form includes the isolation of solitary souls, these women are still not lost souls.
Sula is not cast out of the community. She, in fact, is more a part of the
community than Helene or Nel, for everyone comes to depend on Sula as their vision of evil. The community and individual families and marriages and mothers and children become closer all because of Sula.

Adolescents form another category of Morrison characters who find the world to be a difficult place. This pain of adolescence that runs so deeply through Morrison novels is a familiar theme in many other novels in American history—but most of the characters in those novels are white. Gawky, awkward, lonely girls have found themselves scattered among the pages in an American literary tradition. Adolescence scares these girls because of the changes in their bodies, but also because of the fear of the unknown. They are too old to play like girls and too young to be women and often they are too naive to feel secure about the future. Morrison’s young girls find themselves doubly caught in the pains of adolescent insecurities as well as racial prejudice, but many of their fears are quite similar to other adolescents in literature. Frankie of Carson McCullers’ The Member of the Wedding, Mick of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter and Scout of Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird are a few such characters. Expanding the list to short story fiction would include characters such as Joy, better known as Hulga, in Flannery O’Connor’s “Good Country People,” Mary Fortune in “A View of the Woods,” Lucynell in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and Sylvia in Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron.” These are all girls who feel isolated and unhappy with their view of themselves. “Do I give you the creeps?” “Do you think I will grow into a Freak?” (McCullers 273). These are the words of Frankie Addams, who asks the questions that many of these other girls feel about their rapidly changing bodies and place in the world. Some, like Frankie, are frustrated with awkward bodies while others wish they were boys so that they might enjoy more freedoms. Still others want to escape society’s
pressures. What is worse is that the characters in each of these novels and stories feel cut off from anyone who can really understand their fear. Of course, all of these young ladies are white and their worlds are much different from Morrison's characters, but Pecola and Claudia and Frieda do have similar insecurities and feelings of "ugliness." The Bluest Eye reveals the pain of all adolescents who wish they were someone else or at least that they were "somehow" else. Just as Pecola wishes for blue eyes, and Claudia wants to be Shirley Temple, Frankie wishes she were not so tall and Scout wishes she were not a girl at all. All of them feel somehow "caught," in the words of Frankie—caught inside themselves. Although there is no mistaking that Morrison's characters are black and their worlds are very different from those of Frankie, Scout, and these other white children, there is still a common thread running through the lives of all of these young girls in their feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and awkwardness. Adolescence, regardless of eye color, is a time for pain and inner search, but Morrison brings something new to the entire view of adolescents in fiction. While most of these white writers reveal isolated individuals alone in their adolescent misery, Morrison reveals the strength of friends and sisters who give hope, love, and comfort to overcome these feelings of "freakishness" that only a sister sufferer could understand.

Why would Toni Morrison center so much attention on adolescents, young adults, and sisters? Why is that particular time or relationship in a woman's life of interest to her? One reason, perhaps, is the uniqueness about the time in which a young girl comes of age. Susan Koppelman claims that the choices made during adolescence are of permanent importance.

Their friendships are forged and tested as they examine and explore together the choices that seem to be open to them or the
choices they dream about—choices that, once made, will almost inevitably lead them in separate directions, away from each other.
(Koppelman 288)

These girls should have choices to make that will determine the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, Morrison's young ladies do not have many possible pathways. Their lives are limited by gender, race, and socioeconomic prejudices, but they are also limited by their community's past expectations. Since many of the black women of Morrison's fiction, particularly those in her earlier works, never expect to be free of their many restrictions, they do not visualize a life much different for their daughters. Why should these girls foresee anything more than a life of service—service to white employers and children of employers, service to black men, service to their own children? Their only choice is who and where. But the children, such as Frieda and Claudia, are still naive enough to expect at least the chance of something different in life. The children still have hope. The children still plant marigolds and expect them to grow. As Koppelman states, the "illusion cherished by young women of this age that real choices exist for them makes these stories especially poignant" (288). The adults are the ones who see futility in their optimism while their young companions see hope. And so, Morrison centers much of her attention on adolescents, the dreamers and visionaries who believe in themselves because they have each other.

Renita Weems writes of another type of misfit, Morrison's "artists without art form," a description taken from Sula. Weems sees most Morrison women in this light. Pauline Breedlove arranges jars while Pilate studies a fourth-grade geography book and Baby Suggs searches for colors. Marilyn Mobley relegates Jadine to this same category. She calls Jade the "unsuccessful artist"
like Pauline who missed paints and crayons and Sula who “became dangerous”—but Jadine is privileged and so chooses to study art rather than do it (Mobley, *Folk Roots* 152). Alice Walker illustrates a need for outlets of creativity in “In Search of Our Mother’s Garden,” saying that women were “driven to a numb and bleeding madness by springs of creativity in them for which there was no release” (Walker 233). Sula and others are frustrated because they have no outlet for creativity. Weems quotes Morrison’s description of Sula.

In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (Morrison, *Sula* 112)

As Weems points out, because of their race and sex, these women are “relegated to stools behind windows looking out at life passing them by” (Weems 97). The description by Weems is accurate to a point, but she goes on to incorrectly analyze Morrison’s comments in relation to an interview with John Steptoe. While Morrison describes the importance of “place” and the rooms of a house to a woman, Weems interprets this to mean “confinement.” She sees Morrison women to be suffering entrapment with “their broken wings” (98). Weems points to the image of Pecola at the end of *The Bluest Eye* and her flailing her arms like a “grounded” bird. Weems shows that Pilate and Sula are the only Morrison characters “who are free enough within themselves to search for their own space” (99). The confining lives of Morrison’s women are juxtaposed against the free-living men, according to Weems. “Adventure in a
man is considered ingratitude in a woman," she claims (99). What Weems
forgets to point out is that Morrison's men are not particularly free either. Just
because they run away does not mean that they find adventure and happiness.
Cholly Breedlove, Joe Trace, and Soaphead Church are not really free. In fact,
because they do not have the "roots" described by Morrison, they seem very
bewildered and lost much of the time. According to Morrison in a 1977 interview
with Mel Watkins, "It's a feminine concept--things happening in a room, a house.
That's where we live, in houses. Men don't live in those houses, they really
don't" (Watkins 46). Morrison goes on to explain that "black men travel, they
split. . . . It's a part of black life, a positive, majestic thing, but there is a price to
pay--the price is the children" (46). It would seem that the women who are left
behind to take care of the children also pay the price, but the women are more
grounded because they are left behind. And the men who leave, although
having adventures with many women in many towns, never seem very happy
such as in the case of Paul D whose heart has rusted shut. Morrison also
claims that there "should be a quality of adventure and a quality of nest" in a
woman's life (Taylor-Guthrie 104). Regardless, Weems sees women such as
Pilate and Sula as the ones who pay the price for their freedom through their
loneliness and serve as the pariahs against whom "'upright' women can
measure their righteousness" (Weems 99).

Morrison's use of the "freak" is quite different from that of others who have
written stories about the grotesque or nonconformist in the past. Morrison, in
fact, depicts a connection between the freak and all of society. All people are, in
some fashion, a freak. Each of Morrison's women finds some difficulty in fitting
in with the rest of society. Even Maureen Peal has six fingers on her hand and
Jade is a cultural orphan, spat upon by black womanhood. The women of Toni
Morrison's novels are freaks, carrying a father's bones in a burlap sack, receiving sexual stimulation from felines and feminine products, breast feeding a son who is far too old, and clothes-pinning a daughter's nose to keep it small. They swing small children into the river, and they spend their lives searching for blue eyes. They love, honor, and kill their children. But, in spite of the fact that the label of freak could easily be applied to any of these women, Morrison shows us that we are all freaks of one sort or another.

A freak is, by definition, someone who, for one reason or another, does not fit in with the rest of society--someone who is abnormal through physical or mental differences--someone who is alone and isolated from the rest of mankind. Throughout the pages of literature, these freaks have cried out for attention as the pressures of conformity and pain of isolation grated against individuality. Literature of the past is filled with freaks, from monstrous forms such as Grendel and Mary Shelley's Frankenstein creature to the hermits and crazed men of Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Poe, the seamen of Melville and scientists of Hawthorne and even the scarlet-lettered Hester--these are all freaks. Most of them are isolationists severely tormented by their world's rejection of abnormality. Twentieth-century literature is no less populated by the freak, as many authors develop themes of isolation and rejection, striving to reveal the pain and suffering of these freakish lives. Throughout the pages of twentieth-century literature, these freaks have cried out for attention from their own families and communities, but most of all, from us as readers. Modern authors have revealed the torment of their freaks, often through their own identification with the life of outsiders. Many of these writers have striven to show that a society's reaction to its freaks--its unique individuals--is symbolic of
that society's health and strength. Toni Morrison's freaks may be viewed as part of a long tradition of these fascinating characters.

Many of Morrison's young women seek identity through basic fulfillment of needs—often their own self-gratification. They search for power, security, or a sense of place—primarily through sex—often sex with a married man. Sometimes Morrison's women move to an extension of self by loving and supplying the needs of her child. Although that fact alone would not classify these women as freaks, when the bonds between mother and child are never severed or when the mother uses that bond as permission to control the life or death of the child, then the relationship fits the criteria of freakishness. Sometimes a woman attempts to move out of self into the community, which again, in itself is not the act of a freak, but when that move destroys the self, once again the relationship becomes freakish.

Another type of misfit is the servant—trapped in a white man's world and often having to push aside her own family. While Alice Walker's Sofia from The Color Purple tells a sad story of a black servant's struggle with her white employer, her tale is not nearly so painful as Pecola's in Morrison's The Bluest Eye. Pecola is the young black child of a woman who prefers living with her white employers. Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove, spends her free time in the movie theater pretending to be the beautiful white women on the screen. She views herself as ugly. She treats her child much as the white mistress of the house would have and then hugs and comforts the white child as she should her own. If Pauline Breedlove wishes that she were white and beautiful, one way to place herself in that social atmosphere would be to imagine that she were white and to ridicule anyone below her status. That would include her own child, Pecola, who searches for acceptance in a world that loves blond-
haired, blue-eyed Shirley Temples. Pauline is a misfit within her own culture as she has accepted this imaginary white world and Hollywood images as her own. Pauline wants something more out of life but she is not quite certain how to obtain it. From her childhood she remembers the sounds of the choir.

There was a woman named Ivy who seemed to hold in her mouth all of the sounds of Pauline’s soul. Standing a little apart from the choir, Ivy sang the dark sweetness that Pauline could not name; she sang the death-defying death that Pauline yearned for; she sang of the Stranger who knew . . . (The Bluest Eye 90)

Pauline misses the singer’s relationship to the choir. Pauline is lost to her community whether because of a nail she stepped on as a child, a rotten tooth, an abusive alcoholic husband, or the low self-esteem resulting from all of those things. Because of her displacement, she cannot pass on a healthy heritage to her child.

Countless white southern authors have written about the relationship of the black maid in a white family. In The Member of the Wedding and The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Carson McCullers describes the support and love given to a white adolescent girl by her black maid. Harper Lee writes of a similar relationship in To Kill a Mockingbird. William Faulkner writes of Nancy in “That Evening Sun,” a woman afraid to return to her own home. Fannie Flagg writes of Sipsey in Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe, a woman who kills a man to protect her employer’s baby. These white-authored southern novels all depict warmth and love crossing racial boundaries through the care of these black “other mothers” for white children. But the black woman’s perspective, her sense of place in the white world, her struggles to return to her black community each day—these concerns are not addressed by many white authors. McCullers, Lee, and many others fail to consider the domestic’s view of the
situation, much less the point of view of the child of that domestic, as in the case of Pecola and Pauline. The community is responsible for helping to develop healthy relationships within complicated situations. Black women domestics were forced into being the link between races—walking freely between the homes of both communities. Since their children could not cross those boundaries with them, tensions could arise as black women moved back and forth from other mother to mother.

As Morrison’s writing has matured, the focus on female characters has taken her away from crazed preachers. Her women, although considered unusual, cannot have the luxury of standing on a soapbox. Even Baby Suggs, who becomes a preacher for her community in Beloved, continues to be a provider for her family and community. Her function is to unite and free her people—quite the opposite of Soaphead Church, who blinds a young girl searching for help, or Shadrack, who leads his townspeople into a collapsing tunnel. Her women must not only be the bread winners but also the bread bakers—feeding and caring for their own families and many times their white families too. These women are driven by a fierce instinct for family survival—crossing a river with the precious cargo of an unborn child and mother’s milk, or jumping through a window to save a burning child. Although burdened with a peg leg, no navel, or a tree upon her back, each woman survives, bearing the weight of the family on her shoulders.

Morrison’s freaks are functional members of their societies—quite different from the deformed misfits of grotesque fiction. Characters who try to remain apart from their communities cannot be complete as they isolate themselves within their own freakish worlds. Morrison strives to demonstrate the need for individuals to understand a sense of place, as well as the need for
a community to create a safe world for its misfits. Because each of these women is, in one way or another, a type of freak, she cannot shun or ridicule any of these other characters. Ella cannot condemn Sethe for her most horrid of acts—the murder of a child—for she and the other women know that they too are guilty. Although the freak is there for the community to wipe itself on as in the case of Sula and Pecola, this does not happen very often in Morrison, since forgiveness and understanding are the first steps toward community. Morrison does not allow for the existence of isolated figures, as every woman, regardless of her particular problems, becomes a part of the choir.

Morrison’s view of community prevents misfits from becoming isolated malcontents by establishing the need for women to relate to other women. Women who love and understand one another as sisters, daughters, or mothers are unlikely to become lost in the overwhelming difficulties of their worlds. These same women are also unlikely to blame one another for their predicaments and instead work together to solve problems. Of course, Morrison does not create an unrealistic paradise in which everything is solved by this connection between women. These relationships still require a difficult balancing act in which each woman tries to learn to value and love herself as well as realize her proper boundaries with other women. The women’s choir may occasionally sing a wrong chord but must continue to allow the music to flow so that the harmonies will come again.

Hansberry’s claim that exceptionalities make a person lonely is true in Morrison’s depiction of women but only to a certain extent. These women can recognize the faults in each other without condemnation because they are all exceptional in one way or another. In a conversation about Sethe in Beloved, Paul D tells Stamp Paid, “Yeah. Damn. That woman is crazy. Crazy.” Stamp’s
reply is, “Yeah, well, ain’t we all?” (265). The men laugh at the comment because they know it is all too true. Each woman has something from her past that could make her an outcast, but Morrison’s community includes its sisters, mothers, and daughters as part of the choir regardless of the faults or even crimes an individual may have committed. The communities in all of these novels need their women, all of the voices to make them strong and whole. Macon Dead witnesses the music of his sister’s house in Song of Solomon.

He turned back and walked slowly toward Pilate’s house. They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba’s piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet.

(29)

This is the women’s choir of Toni Morrison’s fiction—the “taking up and building on” of voice upon voice, creating the powerful strength of a community. Morrison’s women need one another in order to learn how to sing.
Chapter Three
Among Sisters:
The Power of Two in Developing a Women's Community

"The loneliest woman in the world is a woman without a close womanfriend," proclaimed Toni Morrison in a talk given at Sarah Lawrence College in 1978 (Smith, Home Girls, 99). This closeness of womanfriends and the pain suffered with its absence is one of the most important facets in the lives of Morrison's characters, who depend on the strength of a bond with another woman. In the fictional worlds created by Toni Morrison, sisters and friends provide the support for black women to feel secure in a white, patriarchal society. The strength of these sisterly relationships often determines the individual strength of each woman. Without the network and love between "sisters," these women have difficulty finding a place in their male-dominated worlds, sometimes becoming freaks or outcasts to their society. The lack of a "sister"—whether biological or relational—often tarnishes young girls and even older women with insecurity and fear, trapping them inside themselves. In each of her six novels, Toni Morrison writes of a woman's need for love and acceptance, with characters ranging from pre-pubescent girls to dying grandmothers, all in search of the strength and confidence to believe in and love themselves and others. Some of these characters are able to grow and learn to appreciate their own beauty, while others can only find solace in pretending to be something they are not. "Sisters" are an important part of Morrison's women's communities, the choir of rich women's voices that allows and encourages this growth, making all the difference in a young girl's search for acceptance or in an older woman's peace of mind. In Morrison's fiction,
sisters are of utmost importance in helping each woman to love and understand herself, other women, and her place in the community.

Morrison's stories of sisterhood illustrate her belief in their power and necessity in a woman's life. She claims that books about women's friendships are few and far between because these relationships have not been valued by patriarchy and because most people consider this "old wives' tales, or gossip, or anything but information" (McKay 154). In an interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison states, "Relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing" (157). Through these novels, Morrison has turned around this tradition and has shown the necessity of sisters to other women—the necessity of these other women toward helping one another understand the self, other, and world outside.

Many young female characters fill the pages of Morrison's novels. These young girls struggle with identity problems and isolation like Pecola, but at least some of them through the aid of a sister are able to save themselves—to gather enough strength to fight the battle within a white, patriarchal society in which black girls are treated as the least significant members. Some of Morrison's other young girls learn the art of self love that Pecola cannot. Many of these characters are allowed to even feel pretty—or, at least, not ugly. What is interesting to see, however, is that even the beautiful girls have to struggle. They too must find a place in a world that does not easily make room for black girls.

Susan Koppelman believes that the failure of friendship between women prevents any real change in community. In her words, "female bonding and friendship are at the heart of any transformation of the patriarchy" (Koppelman 300). Morrison illustrates how these young women suffer without the love of a
sister, but she also shows how sister strength can change the world—or at least a small part of it. In the novels of Toni Morrison, strength of community begins with the power of two. As each individual’s voice is strengthened by community, the music of Morrison women’s choir fills the world with beauty.

“There was something about when she said ‘Sister,’ and when all those other women said ‘Sister’” according to Toni Morrison, in an interview with Robert Stepto in which she discusses her own mother’s relationships with other women (Stepto 11-12). Morrison and many other black women have written about the importance and power of sisters in their own lives. In talking about her childhood and the neighborhood where she grew up, Morrison describes the relationship among her mother’s friends who shared their lives around the kitchen table (11-12). The richness of those kitchen talks and shared lives works its way into the fictional worlds created by Morrison. Frieda and Claudia listen to the women’s talk, as do Sula and Milkman. Even Violet and Alice Manfred share their miseries in kitchen talks. According to Assata Shakur from “Women in Prison: How We Are,” women “called each other sister because of a feeling rather than as the result of a movement. . . . They supported each other through the lean times, sharing the little they had” (Smith, Home Girls xxi).

Violet and Alice are sisters, but not because of a blood relation or an equal rights march. They are sisters because of their shared existence—their shared feelings. There is power in this sisterhood in the strength of these black women who share life, trusting in each other when nothing else can be trusted.

In Morrison’s fiction, a sister is a woman who shares her life with another woman—cares for her in times of need, supports her and treats her as an equal, provides for her, comforts her, encourages her, and loves her. Through this definition, we see that a sister may be a blood relation or someone close
enough in spirit and thought to be a blood sister. She could even be a woman's mother or lover—as long as both women recognize, love, and respect the other as an equal. Just as all of her women characters find themselves in and through other women, so do Morrison's sisters help one another find each other as well as something of their own. These sisterhoods function within at least three overlapping and often intertwining dimensions: an understanding of self by providing an other self—someone who mirrors the original self; an understanding and love for an other that provides comfort in accepting their nonstandard selves; and an understanding of the outside world through protection against patriarchy, through physical force or by giving alternatives to motherhood and men. So, Morrison sisters help women understand themselves, other women, and their place in the community. Some Morrison sisters serve all of these functions while others only make an attempt and fail. Some Morrison women remain sisterless, such as Pecola and Jade, but these are the women who struggle in their loneliness, for Morrison shows that sisters are the beginning of community, and without community, their voices are lost.

Some of Morrison's sisters are blood relations such as Claudia and Frieda of The Bluest Eye, but most are spiritual sisters like Sula and Nel of Sula. Regardless of whether there is a biological link or not, these young women act as sisters. Often these sisterly relationships involve a triangle of three women who act as sisters toward one another. Pilate, Reba, and Hagar, for instance, of Song of Solomon, act as sisters rather than grandmother, mother, and daughter, just as the prostitutes, China, Poland, and the Maginot Line of The Bluest Eye relate as sisters as well. The sisterly relationships in this study involve the equality of a shared life between and among women.
Toni Morrison's sisters help one another find themselves and a place in the community. Discovering their role as a sister leads women to appreciate the self, other women, and their community. Morrison's sisters function at different dimensions for different purposes. They may provide a mirror of the self and reference to help each sister actually define herself. The focus is on self knowledge, love, and understanding through the help of a sister. Morrison sisters also serve as an other to validate their nonstandard sense of self, finding comfort in an other and in the sisterly love for one another. The focus here is on love and understanding of an other. But, Morrison sisters also give support for one another in struggles against patriarchy through physical protection or by providing alternatives to motherhood and men so that the focus is on the strength of sisters participating in a larger discourse. Understanding Morrison's sisters is of primary importance, since all of her other women's relationships must strive to reach this same level of equality and strength.

Since understanding the nature of women's friendships is important in analyzing the "sisterly" relationships in Morrison's fiction some attention must be given to recent studies on friendship. In the afterword of a fiction collection edited by Susan Koppelman called Women's Friendships, Koppelman describes friendships as,

... a rich, complex, archetypal relationship. Although friendships can vary infinitely, certain things must be part of their content. One thing that must be there is a recognition of the need for reciprocity in the relationship. There must also be the opportunity for reciprocity. Finally, there must be a balance of power or privilege between or among the participants in the relationship. That is, the friends must be equally in and subject to each other's power.

(Koppelman 280)

Koppelman stresses the significance of learning how to both give and receive,
"serve and be served" (281). She describes a warmth, support, and love in many women's lives and argues that women have always cherished friendship because of the "mutual reflection for the friends of images of themselves they cherish, visions of their best selves" (285). Koppeiman's statements are important in understanding the nature of sisterhood and friendships in Morrison's novels. Morrison's friendship between Nel and Sula reveals this ability of friends to show women their best selves. Nel says that Sula was the only one who, "made her laugh . . . made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle, and a little raunchy" (Sula 95).

Many theorists, such as Marianne Hirsch, Katherine Payant, and Nancy Chodorow see "sisterhood" as a threat to "motherhood"—one relationship competing against the other, but Toni Morrison's fictional characters reveal a much more complicated balance of power among mothers, daughters, and sisters. She depicts sister relationships that may involve one generation or even three in which there are no power struggles. Morrison shows that a mother may also be a sister and a sister may be both daughter and mother. While Pauline Breedlove may fit Payant's description of a "footbinder," a mother who limits her daughter to patriarchal constraints, and even Mrs. MacTeer could be criticized for her white doll gifts to her daughters, Morrison's first novel still does not support Hirsch and Chodorow's fears of the depiction of sisterhood's power over motherhood. Mrs. MacTeer's love for her daughters and strong relationships with other women serve to strengthen the sister role between Claudia and Frieda. The mother's voice is very important to these young girls as a model of female bonding and as a strong moral guide. Sula's sisters may fit Payant's theory of the problem mother more closely since Sula and Nel both rebel against their mothers, but Nel's mother rebelled against her mother too, so
they are merely following a maternal pattern. Song of Solomon's triad of Pilate, Reba, and Hagar shows the close, sisterly relationship of three generations of women and illustrates the intertwining of the mother's story with the daughter's and sister's. Morrison's sisters, therefore, do not fit the patterns established by these theorists, since the relationships are much more complicated, intertwining the harmonies of sister, daughter, and mother.

The dimensions of sisterhood I have described in Morrison's work—love of self, other, and community—build on one another, but not in a linear fashion. They circle back and move forward according to the needs of the individual. For Morrison sisters to find their own voices, they depend primarily on themselves and the unique relationships that they build within this rich women's choir, fulfilling different needs and serving many purposes. As in any choir, the many voices blend in harmony, while sometimes voicing completely different words and often at a different pitch. In a black women's choir, while the voice of a solo artist may be heard above the others as she sings the primary lyrics, the rest of the choir often responds to her words, sometimes answering her pleas or supporting her words. This is the beauty of a choir—the richness of chords with the laying and overlaying of voice upon voice. Sisters serve to provide an other self—someone to teach self love at the most basic level by giving validation. Even with love of self, however, an individual must go on to find a place in society and must develop a social identity. Morrison's sisters help one another fit in by comforting each other, creating their own society, in a sense, so that they do not feel quite so isolated and rejected in a white patriarchal world. They provide a way for individuals to move beyond self-love through loving an other and loving the self in the other. Eventually, however, these sisters must go beyond their own society by providing protection against patriarchy, supporting
one another through the difficulties of life and sometimes death. Of course, Morrison also gives evidence of those who remain sisterless, the lost and unloved women who never sing in the choir.

One of the most basic and yet most important functions of a sister in Morrison's fiction is to teach self love and understanding. Sisters provide individuals with the strength to learn self love. Without Frieda, Claudia cannot learn to value, love, or understand herself, especially since she is continually shown that black girls with brown eyes are not pretty. Morrison sisters reflect the strength and potential spirit of one another, giving the confidence to believe in the self. Even when these sisters feel isolated from the rest of the world or somehow different from other women, they find strength in self because of their love for each other. Morrison's primary examples of sisters who provide this understanding of self are Claudia and Frieda of *The Bluest Eye* and Nel and Sula of *Sula* as well as Dorcas and Felice of *Jazz*. These sisters help one another find themselves by encouraging each other in believing that there is a "self" to find. As early as 1975, Barbara Christian wrote of Morrison's attention to friendships between women. At that point, Morrison had written only two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*.

Both novels chronicle the search for beauty amidst the restrictions of life, both from without and within. In both novels, the black woman, as girl then grown woman, is the turning character looking at the world outside as she peers inside herself. In both novels friendship between two women or girls serves as the periscope through which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured. (Christian 25)

Christian's comments, although written only about Morrison's early works, fit remarkably well with her later books as well. She says that Morrison's "heroines are double-faced—looking outward and searching inward, trying to
find some continuity between the seasons, the earth, other people, the cycles of life and themselves" (25). The friendships between and among these sisters serve to validate each woman's existence by mirroring her inner strength and beauty.

In her earliest work, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison creates a community that allows very little encouragement for its adolescent girls, but a few of the girls continue somehow to have hope in a hopeless world. Those who have a sister find faith in one another where no one else can see possibilities. Even when Maureen Peal does not buy them ice cream, Claudia and Frieda still love themselves. They can find inner strength in standing together and calling her names when she hurts Pecola because they have at least an outward faith and confidence in the self. They do not need validation from other people or the world outside because they have one another. Pecola does not have the same comfort. Pecola, regardless of their attempts to save her, remains alone. Frieda and Claudia have one another, and they love each other even though they do not have blue eyes or any of the other standards of beauty required in their society. This gives them a self-confidence that Pecola cannot enjoy. Their strength reveals the power of sisterhood to validate each other, one of the richest forms of love in Morrison's fiction.

Claudia and Frieda cannot understand the people who love the Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals of the world. “Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world” (61-62). They cannot understand the rejection they feel and ask, “What was the secret? What did we lack?” (62). The two of them ask themselves for answers, not yet understanding their
society's dominant definitions of beauty and success. What is important, however, is the strength these two sisters feel even when faced with "honey voiced" parents.

Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend the unworthiness.

The girls see the beauty in each other and, therefore, see the beauty in themselves. Perhaps this is the sisters' rebellion--although a quiet one. They will continue loving themselves, continue valuing and validating the other, even when rejected by their society's patriarchal definitions of beauty. Because this is their first exposure to envy, the girls find it hard to accept Maureen as an enemy. They secretly know that Maureen Peal is not the enemy and that, "The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (62).

Together, Claudia and Frieda find faith in the knowledge of their own beauty, for even if the rest of the world rejects them, they have the knowledge and love of their own "scars" and "dirt," their own worth. Claudia and Frieda, Morrison's first sisters, do for one another what Morrison wanted to do for young girls through writing The Bluest Eye. Morrison says that she wanted to write a book in which young black girls could see themselves. By mirroring one another, Claudia and Frieda learn to love themselves--learn to love their own skin, hair, eyes, voice, because when they looked at the other's face, they saw an image of the self. Society cannot teach them that love since society has its own definitions of beauty. They can only learn the art of self love through the validation they see in each other's eyes.

Again, although many of Morrison's sisters are sisters by blood, many others are non-biologically related women who are connected by bonds beyond
family ties. They are spirit sisters who find strength and companionship outside the family in friendship with another woman. These young women find the same power of acceptance and validation through each other that allows Claudia and Frieda to shun the world that rejects poor black girls. In Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973), Sula and Nel have a very similar relationship to Claudia and Frieda from *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison admits the intentional progression from *The Bluest Eye* to *Sula*. "I think I was certainly interested in talking about black girlhood in *The Bluest Eye* and not so interested in it in *Sula*. I wanted to move it into the other part of their life. That is, what do the Claudias and Friedas, those feisty little girls, grow up to be?" (Stepto 20). In this novel, Morrison illustrates the power sisters have to look beyond family background and personality to find each other inside the other—even when the sisters are as different as Sula and Nel. Even with distinctly different family backgrounds, upbringing, and appearance, the two become as if one and the same. While Frieda and Claudia easily mirror one another, their personalities and actions being so similar that they are easily confused, Sula and Nel have unique personalities. Frieda is no more experienced or worldly than Claudia, as is seen in their search to eliminate Frieda's "ruinedness" after Mr. Henry "touched" her, but Sula always holds the upper hand in "worldliness" as compared to Nel. Morrison claims that she was working out a story about good and evil in writing *Sula*, and that you sometimes can't tell which is which since people can be living right next door to evil without even knowing it. Morrison's "evil" is characterized in Sula. "When creating Sula, I had in mind a woman of force... She doesn't stop existing even after she dies" (Parker 63). In describing Nel, Morrison talks about the hard working women who "do what they have to do... Nobody ever thinks about these people. So they just sit on buses and carry the..."
weight of the world forever” (62). Morrison here portrays these distinctly different personalities in such a way that they would appear to be opposites—one being an evil force while the other carries the weight of the world—but in the novel they are sisters who complement one another. In spite of all of their differences, Sula and Nel are united as one, validating the other’s existence, having together created “their something else to be” (Sula 52). Like Claudia and Frieda, these two women help one another find inner strength, love, and understanding.

Opposites in appearance and needs—Nel and Sula complement one another. “Wishbone thin and easy-assed,” Nel is the “color of wet sandpaper” while Sula is a “heavy brown” (52). Sula’s house is full of activity and people in contrast to Nel’s home where she and her mother live alone most of the time as her father works aboard ship and is seldom home. The two girls complement one another—one, seeking order; the other, disorder. One needs imagination and emotion; the other, composure and dependability. Both are searching for an intimacy that they have never experienced. Although they had known each other for years, Sula and Nel need one another at this particular time in their lives to give them confidence and love, and so at the age of twelve, the young girls become inseparable.

Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personality. Although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes. (53)

They find one another at a key time in their own growth as adolescents. The difficulties faced by these girls—who, at an early age, realize the limitations of being a black girl in 1922 America, in a world where the men come and go
freely from their lives and only the women stay to provide security--are somehow lessened by the feelings they have for one another. They find strength and encouragement in one another as well as the sharing of pain and fear.

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. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula’s because he was dead; Nel’s because he wasn’t), they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

The friendship shared by these two girls helps define their “something else to be.” The love between friends gives each girl the chance to gather strength and become confident in the intimacy they share.

In the safe harbor of each other’s company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things. . . . Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement. (55)

This “intimacy” shared by Sula and Nel gives them a similar confidence to that Frieda and Claudia enjoy—all because they have each other. To Nel, “Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself. . . . Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves” (95). The two women mirror one another but also help to define each other, allowing one another to find love and understanding of self.

Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum describe this kind of attachment in their study of women’s friendships called Between Women: Facing Up to Feelings of Love, Envy and Competition in Women’s Friendships.

Because women derive so much of their identity and sense of well-being through attachment, and because women’s friendships
contain a merged attachment, a friend with whom one has made a significant attachment serves almost as a part of the self.
(Orbach 63)

The feeling of "connectedness" replaces any feelings of "inner emptiness," according to this theory. Elizabeth Abel believes that "friendship in Sula is both the vehicle and product of self-knowledge" and that Morrison "presents an ideal of female friendship dependent not on love, obligation, or compassion, but on an almost impossible conjunction of sameness and autonomy, attainable only with another version of oneself" (Rubenstein 161). In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison talks about the attraction of Nel and Sula and how each represents something that the other needed in life. "There was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something the other one had" (Stepto 13). Because Sula and Nel are a part of one another, they validate themselves by loving one another.

There are hints of the friendship of Sula and Nel in the lives of Dorcas and Felice in Jazz (1992). Since Dorcas is dead at the beginning of the novel, their friendship is told primarily through flashbacks and varying points of view. Dorcas, like Sula and also Beloved, selfishly demands love, attention and fun whenever possible, regardless of who might have to suffer. Felice's grandmother does not approve of her friendship with Dorcas just as Nel's mother disapproves of Sula at first. But when everyone else in school separates by color, Felice and Dorcas refuse. According to Felice, "I hate that stuff--Dorcas too. So me and her were different that way" (Jazz 201). The two girls proudly reject color prejudice for the friendship and companionship they share. They look nothing alike, but they help one another validate the beauty and worth in each other, learning to love their own beauty because of the

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
confidence gained through their sister. Even though they are teased and
tormented like Sula and Nel and like Frieda and Claudia, they do not allow the
accusers to win. “‘When some nastymouth hollered, ‘Hey, fly, where’s
buttermilk?’ or ‘Hey, kinky, where’s kind?’ we stuck our tongues out and put our
fingers in our noses to shut them up’” (201). If this did not stop the harassment,
the girls would “lay into” their tormentors. “‘Some of those fights ruined my
clothes and Dorcas’s glasses, but it felt good fighting those girls with Dorcas.
She was never afraid and we had the best times’” (201). Physically fighting
against their oppressors seems to rejuvenate Felice and Dorcas and give them
more confidence in their friendship as it does Sula and Nel and Claudia and
Frieda. Through this confidence in each other they learn to have confidence in
the self. By physically fighting against those who would call them ugly, Felice
and Dorcas are able to gain more strength and love for the self.

When they are seventeen years old, Dorcas’ life is described as
“unbearable,” as she lives with her protective aunt and her memories of the
father and mother who both died violent deaths. Her friendship with Felice
seems to be one of the few highlights of her life. Her only desire is “lying down
somewhere in a dimly lit place enclosed in arms, and supported by the core of
the world” (Jazz 63). When you are seventeen, according to the narrator,
“Nature freaks for you, then” (63). When the two girls sneak out to go to a party,
Felice helps Dorcas to dress and “chattered compliments” all the way there to
get Dorcas to forget about what she is wearing and focus on the party. “They
pause to exchange looks before knocking. Even in the dim hallway the dark-
skinned friend heightens the cream color of the other. Felice’s oily hair
enhances Dorcas’ soft, dry waves” (64). So, Felice encourages, compliments,
and complements her friend—giving her the strength to face the party where she
is unfortunately "acknowledged, appraised, and dismissed" by "the brothers" (67). Dorcas and Felice find strength and encouragement in the other's eyes, and when the party is over, they still have that strength. The two girls "exchange looks" throughout their friendship, acknowledging the other's worth, mirroring the strength and love within.

While Morrison sisters learn about self love through the validation they receive from their mirrored images, they also learn about love of the other through the nurturing and comfort they both give and receive. Sisters often provide comfort during times of physical or mental distress by giving specific aid or at least kind words to the sister in need. Both women benefit in this case, since there must be that reciprocal relationship in friendship, and although one friend may perform the nurturing act and the other receive it, the balance of power in friendship allows the roles to be reversed whenever needed. So, Morrison's sisters move within another dimension that allows them to learn to love another woman, to move outside of the self and reach for understanding of an other.

In The Bluest Eye, Claudia and Frieda find this strength and understanding by comforting one another through the problems they face as black girls in a prejudiced world. The humor in the interaction of these nine- and ten-year old philosophers relieves the tension of Pecola's "too harsh" life. One scene in which the two girls are trying to decide whether to burn the mustard greens and anger their mother or not burn the greens and have to eat them is a welcome relief to the stark drudgery of Pecola's home. The balance of power described by Koppelman is clearly seen in this and many other scenes as the two girls make all decisions together—neither one really taking the lead. Morrison's depiction of sisterly talks and graham cracker mountains shows the
camaraderie and comfort experienced in the relationship of these two young girls. Frieda and Claudia find comfort in one another, knowing that they are loved. "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house" (The Bluest Eye 14). Claudia and Frieda not only have family love, but, more importantly, they have each other, while Pecola is alone—her only other friends being the prostitutes upstairs. Claudia and Frieda share secrets and problems and dreams with one another while Pecola hides with her fear under the covers. While Claudia during an illness can go to sleep with the comfort of her sister singing to her, "her eyes . . . full of sorrow" (14), Pecola prays for escape. Claudia and Frieda have the comfort of a playmate that cares deeply for them and is a part of their lives—they have the reassurance and security of a sister’s love and the nurturing relationship described by Orbach and Eichenbaum. Although they try to give that to Pecola, their love comes too late and is just not enough to compensate for the pain she has suffered all her life. Morrison uses Pecola’s isolation to demonstrate the strength of the shared life of Frieda and Claudia.

In the scene in which Frieda worries that she has become "ruined," Morrison reveals a painful contrast between the MacTeer girls and Pecola. When Frieda tells her parents that Mr. Henry "touched" her on her breasts, they immediately confront him and try to beat him, chasing him down with brooms and shotguns, Mr. MacTeer reacting as Morrison’s own father did in a similar situation. The scene is almost humorous as it is described by Frieda especially because of Claudia’s reaction, "‘Oh, shoot, I always miss stuff’" (80). She also feels left out, in that no one would ever try to touch her because she doesn’t have "‘nothing to pinch’" (80). But what is important is that Claudia is there to
hear Frieda's story. Frieda has a sister, a non-judgmental friend to listen and try to help. Claudia helps her think through the problem and plan the solution of getting some whiskey so that Frieda will not be “ruined.” Morrison's portrayal of the sisters in this scene reveals their strength in contrast with Pecola's complete loss. Because Frieda can talk to Claudia, she feels comforted and strong once again, especially since Claudia is actually a little jealous of Frieda's “ruinedness,” which gives Frieda even a slight feeling of superiority. Together, they go to find the cure for her ruined state. So, these sisters nurture and comfort one another through their day-to-day lives as well as in times of duress. They find strength through their understanding and love of another woman.

Morrison's women sometimes find their comfort and companionship from a more unlikely source than a blood relation. In Beloved, Sethe finds encouragement from Amy Denver, a poor white girl who gives Sethe what she needs to continue her journey across the Ohio. Although the two are both runaways, searching for something better in life, it is unlikely that they would have become friends at all under different circumstances. Amy, however, performs the kind act, the act of nurturing for Sethe. In rubbing Sethe's swollen feet, pressing spider webs into her scarred “chokecherry tree” back, and creating makeshift shoes for her deformed feet, Amy's “good hands” give Sethe the comfort she needs to complete her journey (80-81). "I'm good at sick things" are Amy's bragging words (82). Soon after those words are spoken, Amy must once again help Sethe, this time by helping to deliver her child in a boat filled with river water. Amy's “good hands” save Sethe and Denver—giving life to the near dead, a kindness that is a gift, not a necessity. Amy helps Sethe because she cannot allow her to suffer and perhaps because she sees the similarities in their predicaments. For an evening, the two women care for the
baby together, not caring about the rest of the world. "They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn't care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something appropriately and well" (Beloved 84). Although the intimacy shared by these two women is short lived, its effects last a lifetime. Because Amy gives her loving hands to Sethe, Sethe is able to find the strength to continue living, finding solace in the memory and retelling of a kind act. But Sethe also gives to Amy just by listening to her story about her mother and hearing about her struggles. Sethe and Amy illustrate the reciprocity described by Koppelman, the give and take of a relationship between sisters.

Morrison's depiction of a shared life—this dimension in which a woman finds comfort, security, and strength through another woman—illustrates her rejection of much of American literature's tendency toward isolationism. Morrison clearly reveals a need in women for other women—a need in this power of two. Sethe and Amy give of themselves to one another just as Claudia and Frieda, Sula and Nel, and Dorcas and Felice strengthen each other's lives and remind one another of who they are. Morrison women depend on this sisterhood as one of the only stable forces in their lives and when they lose that connection with their sister, they often seem to lose themselves.

In another dimension, Morrison women must learn their place in the community through their experience with the world outside of their friendship. Morrison sisters often function to protect one another against the forces of the outside world—sometimes through physical force, sometimes through words, and sometimes through providing alternatives to patriarchal definitions of womanhood. In each Morrison novel, these sisters provide strength and choices to each other—giving one another the courage to fight for a new way of
life. Frieda and Claudia, Nel and Sula, Dorcas and Felice are not afraid to launch into their tormentors whether they are male or female, black or white. Lena strikes out against her own brother when he steps in the way of her sister’s happiness. In addition to the physical actions of these feisty women, still other Morrison women illustrate possible alternatives to the patriarchal confines of wife and mother.

The use of physical defense by young girls against male and female and black and white oppressors appears in many of Morrison’s novels, including The Bluest Eye, Sula, Song of Solomon, and Jazz. Katherine Payant theorizes in Becoming and Bonding: Contemporary Feminism and Popular Fiction by American Women Writers that, “In most of the novels of the 1970s, female friendship, when it appeared as a theme, illustrated how patriarchy induces female rivalry or suggested various options for the heroine” (Payant 79). According to the research of Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum, women actually are very likely to compete for the approval of other women. “For many women, men provided the excuse, or the conscious reason, for making an effort with themselves, but the real target was just as often to gain women’s attention” (Orbach 98). Morrison’s female friendships are much broader and certainly more encompassing than Orbach and Eichenbaum, or Payant would suggest, but some truth to their theories can be seen in the novels and helps to illustrate how these friendships operate in and through the outside world.

In The Bluest Eye, many obstacles face Frieda and Claudia and challenge their strength. Their next door neighbor friend, Rosemary Villanucci, spies on the girls and taunts them with her 1939-Buick-white-bread-and-butter pride, accusing the girls of “playing nasty.” The sisters remain undaunted; they sometimes beat her up and sometimes ignore her, but they never allow her to
make them feel belittled. Maureen Peal, better known as "Meringue Pie" or "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie," is another tormentor—this one, black. She is certainly no friend to Claudia, Frieda, or Pecola. Although she is black, she is also rich—which automatically sets her apart from the MacTeers and Breedloves. They have more in common with Rosemary. Maureen is also pretty, "a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (The Bluest Eye 52). In Claudia’s words, "She enchanted the entire school" (53)—the entire school except for Frieda and Claudia, that is.

When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the halls; white boys didn’t stone her, white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls’ toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. (53)

Claudia “wanted to kick her” or at least slam Maureen’s hand with the locker door because she cannot stand Maureen’s egg salad sandwiches, perfect clothes, or perfect walk. Claudia reacts the same toward Maureen Peal as she does toward Shirley Temple or the white dolls she was given as a child. Here Claudia treats a black girl with the same anger and sense of injustice that she feels toward white girls. Her jealousy urges her to hurt this symbol of the world’s nearsighted vision of beauty. Maureen is everything that Claudia is not—rich, almost white, confident and well accepted. Claudia hates what she cannot be, but also what society wants her to be. Barbara Smith in “Some Home Truths on the Contemporary Black Feminist Movement” writes of her own experience of growing up and feeling rejected by white school teachers, black men, and others. She, like Claudia and Pecola, felt as though she must have done something horrible or that there was “something fundamentally wrong” with her.
(Smith 262). But, what does Maureen Peal, sisterless herself, illustrate about the strength of the MacTeer girls? She is the vision of beauty that the girls have heard about all their lives, but Maureen is not beautiful inside. Because they have one another, Frieda and Claudia are able to recognize that fact while Pecola is not.

The burning words spoken by Maureen to Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola have no real rebuttal. "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (The Bluest Eye 61). She voices exactly what Claudia and Frieda have always felt and what Pecola has always lived. One of the only reasons that Maureen is interested in Pecola is because of the movie she and her mother have watched several times in which Maureen believes the main character to be named Pecola. Interestingly enough, this movie is about a black girl who “passes” for white and eventually rejects her black roots. Maureen’s reference to Imitation of Life echoes Pauline’s escape to the movies, a symbol of Pecola’s rejection. Pecola believes, however, that there is no escaping or comforting her ugliness, as she is nothing like Maureen. While Claudia wants her to fight back and “spit the misery out on the streets,” she knows that Pecola is beaten. “But she [Pecola] held it in where it could lap up into her eyes” (61). Her eyes reflect the misery she feels within, and she cannot fight back.

Maureen Peal functions as yet another force in the destruction of Pecola’s life and an obstacle for Claudia and Frieda to overcome. She is “almost white” and is loved by all of her teachers and peers—all, it seems, except Frieda and Claudia. Maureen, who is society’s representative of the perfect black girl, tests the strengths of sisterhood, but in the end, Frieda and Claudia remain strong.

Like Frieda and Claudia, Sula and Nel enjoy the comfort and security of friendship and the strength of sisterhood, but here Morrison is illustrating a
more clearly defined struggle against patriarchal forces. And in this case, the
sisters lose. As adolescents, Sula and Nel face their tormentors as ferociously
as Claudia and Frieda which deepens their ties to one another. When faced
with four teenaged white boys, Sula pulls out a knife, sliding off the tip of one
finger, saying, “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (Sula
54-55). Morrison shows Sula’s sudden, rash actions to protect Nel and defend
herself. Like Frieda, Claudia, or Lena, Sula is quick to fight any representative
of patriarchy in defense of her sister. Like her grandmother, Sula mutilates
herself in order to protect her loved one. Sula’s defense is a step beyond any of
these other sisters because she is completely willing to sacrifice a part of herself
to protect her sister.

The strength of Sula and Nel’s sisterhood is tested when they commit
murder. The death of Chicken Little, which takes place immediately after Sula’s
bewilderment at overhearing her mother’s rejection—“I love Sula. I just don’t like
her” (57)—is called a ritual killing by some critics. Before his death, Sula and
Nel have lain in the grass by the river’s edge—not talking, but digging holes in
the black earth with sticks. “Together they worked until the two holes were one
and the same,” but then Nel’s stick breaks, so they fill in the hole with debris.
This digging in the earth is similar to the scenes from The Bluest Eye in which
Frieda and Claudia plant marigold seeds, but find the earth barren. Sula and
Nel dig together, forming one hole—foreshadowing their sharing the same man
later in the book. It is Nel’s stick that breaks just as it is Nel’s marriage that falls
apart. Marianne Hirsch calls this scene “homoerotic,” seeing the stick play to be
their own “symbolic acting out of heterosexual play” (Hirsch “Maternal
Narratives” 267). Margaret Homans writes that the two girls are “aggressively
asserting their femaleness against their subconscious oppression” (Payant
Chicken Little's appearance, "a little boy in too big knickers" picking his nose as he comes up from the river immediately after the stick play, fits with both of these readings. Chicken is a representative child of patriarchy and he is also a representative of the maternal path that Sula and Nel are determined not to follow.

Sula picked him up by his hands and swung him outward then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank.

(Sula 60-61)

The immediate reaction to the disappearance of Chicken below the water's surface shows how close these two girls have grown and how their roles have become interchangeable, for it is Nel who takes charge instead of Sula. Nel is the protector in this incident. While Sula panics, runs to find out whether Shadrack saw, and then comes back to collapse in tears, Nel takes control.

"You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, le's go, Sula" (62-63). Sula asks, "Shouldn't we tell?" and Nel answers, "Let's go. We can't bring him back" (170). So, it is Nel's decision not to tell. She leads Sula away and comforts her. Barbara Hill Rigney calls this death of Chicken Little a "women's ritual sacrifice to female power" (Rigney 50). Others say it is the ritual killing of patriarchy. If this were completely true, however, Nel would never have married or she would never have objected to Sula's sleeping with her husband. If the death of Chicken Little symbolizes anything, it seems more likely that it represents Sula's rejection of motherhood in her own life—casting away the child, and by Nel's accepting and condoning the action, she accepts Sula's choice. Hirsch goes further in calling this scene a symbol of "refusal of adult
heterosexuality and motherhood” (Hirsch “Maternal Narratives” 267). Like a ceremony, it does bring the two girls even closer together and it certainly illustrates their power. At the cemetery, Nel and Sula stand holding hands, “their fingers . . . laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends” (Sula 66) standing together as they would in a ceremony, symbolizing an even stronger union between the two girls as they share this intimate secret.

Much later, when Eva admits knowing the truth and accuses Nel of “watching” the entire incident, Nel questions herself, “Why didn’t I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?” (170). Nel is proud of her control and composure in Sula’s time of need, but she never understands her own joy. By not reacting with compassion for Chicken’s family, by not telling the truth, Nel knows she has done wrong. But even worse are her feelings of joy when he dies. Her reaction is very similar to that of Sula when she watches her own mother burn to death. They “watch” when they could be acting. Nel and Sula both seem surprised at their own reactions to these two deaths, but if Hirsch and Rigney’s theories are correct, Nel and Sula are happy because they have watched the symbolic destruction of patriarchy. And Eva’s claiming that there is no real distinction between the two girls suggests that Sula and Nel have achieved unity, at least in Eva’s and possibly in Sula’s eyes. They have achieved a type of marriage. Perhaps this is why Sula sees no wrong in sleeping with Jude, since she and Nel are one.

Like Claudia and Frieda, Sula and Nel share everything throughout their adolescence, like sisters who flirt with boys together, protect one another, and remain constant companions. But the strength of sisterhood is broken when Nel places the rules of patriarchy over the sanctity of friendship. While Sula returns to their past relationship in which everything was shared, Nel cannot because
she has adopted the patriarchal role modeled by her mother. Nel cannot accept what she considers to be a betrayal, while Sula is simply sharing—as the two always have, believing there to be nothing wrong with her actions.

Hirsch sees this novel as one that "proposes female friendship as an alternative relationship to the maternal, but it does not do so unquestioningly" (Hirsch "Maternal Narratives" 268). Hirsch steers clear of calling this a lesbian story, perhaps because Morrison herself has refused to allow this interpretation, claiming "there is no homosexuality in Sula" (Rubenstein 161). Although Morrison herself refutes any possibility of this being true, her denial of the possibilities indicates some thought has been given to the matter. Morrison does say that if you love a friend, someone will think that you are lesbian (Koenen 73). She also explains how important Nel and Sula should be to one another. "What I really wanted to say about the friendship between Nel and Sula was that if you really do have a friend, a real other, another person that complements your life, you should stay with him or her" (74). If Sula and Nel complement one another, if they are a "real other" for one another, if they are of ultimate importance to one another, then they are part of the lesbian continuum described by Adrienne Rich.

I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range—through each woman's life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. (Rich, Blood 51)

Morrison's description of Sula and Nel in "complementing" one another and her portrayal of their intimate lives together certainly fit within Rich's lesbian continuum and "woman-identified experience." Their relationship also fulfills the criteria described by Rich in seeing women on the lesbian continuum as
part of a political support group.

If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support, if we can also hear it in such associations as marriage resistance... we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism. (Rich, Blood 51-52)

Sula and Nel may never have experienced physical love together, but they love one another more than they love anyone else in the world. They share "a rich inner life," bond "against male tyranny," and they certainly give support to one another. According to Patrick Bjork, Barbara Smith calls the relationship "erotic romanticism," using Nel's dream of lying in a bed of flowers while waiting for a prince and Sula's dream of riding on horseback toward the smell of roses to show that the two women are connected through these "erotic" dreams (Bjork 69). Smith's interpretation illustrates the physical connection between these two friends—even if it is only through dreams. Bjork claims that Smith has a tendency to "rewrite the text" (Bjork 69). He uses Banyiwa-Horne's interpretation of a "oneness in the girls' mutuality; separately they function poorly" (69) and quotations from Sula that they are "the closest thing to both another and a self" (Sula 69). Bjork's examples, however, do not refute Smith's analysis. Instead, they actually support her view of Sula and Nel as lesbian. Houston Baker in "When Lindbergh Sleeps with Bessie Smith: The Writing of Place in Toni Morrison's Sula" calls Barbara Smith's analysis invalid because of Sula's sexual relationship with Ajax, claiming that the relationship redeems heterosexuality in Morrison (Baker 90)—a ridiculous assumption that because Sula has sexual relations with Ajax she cannot be considered lesbian.

Regardless, however, of whether the label of lesbian is used, Morrison is
illustrating alternatives to patriarchy's definitions of womanhood. Sula and Nel belong together but do not remain together because of the powers of patriarchy. Nel's placement of marriage and children over her friendship with Sula is a betrayal that she does not even recognize until after Sula's death. Hirsch points to Sula—as well as Jadine—as women who are alternatives to traditional female roles, since they do not have children and they also are free to come and go as they please. Hirsch refers to Nel's reaction to Sula's lifestyle, "You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man" (Sula 123). According to Hirsch, this novel indicates that women can act like men, but they cannot get away with it ("Maternal Narratives" 268). To Morrison, Sula is "a lawless woman" while "Nel is the community" (Stepto 14).

Payant's description of women's rivalry caused by patriarchy can be seen in Sula, but the rivalry is one sided. Nel rejects her sister for her husband and then loses both. Morrison's version of female rivalry indicates a loss on all sides. Nel first rejects Sula by marrying, by "reordering priorities and values according to social standards," (Rigney 50). Jude, as his name implies, betrays his wife and then deserts her and their children. Nel, accepting her patriarchal role even without her patriarchal oppressor, rejects her sister, not understanding what Sula knows, that "a lover was not a comrade" (Sula 121). Nel, raised in the stifled home of Helene Wright, cannot forgive Sula for her free spiritedness. Sula's actions are much like those of her own mother who often slept with the husbands of other women. Both women have returned to their mother's roles. As sisters, they are invincible. As their mothers, they are destroyed. Without the strength of this relationship, both Sula and Nel suffer and neither is happy.
After Sula's death, Nel finally realizes what she has been missing in her life.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We were girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (Sula 174)

Nel recognizes the love she feels for Sula, not knowing the power of their love until she is without it. Hirsch calls this response to Sula's death Nel's wish to return to "her fantasy of a perfect sisterhood" ("Maternal Narratives" 269). Nel's pain is very real as she remembers the closeness and love she once shared with Sula. Orbach and Eichenbaum describe the emptiness and sense of being "at sea" that women feel if this kind of friendship is lost. Women suffer because of their loss of the emotional intimacy they shared with the friend. "It does shake each woman up inside. It can feel every bit as severe an emotional wallop as a serious shift in a sexual relationship. It can render one temporarily fragile in similar ways" (Orbach 65). According to their study, women are treated with kindness and love if they lose a man, but never receive the same sympathy for a lost friend. This leads to confusion along with the hurt of losing a loved one. Nel's loss at the end of the novel consumes her and she can do nothing but cry for her loss. In Sula, the novel Morrison wanted to write about women's friendships, Hirsch and Payant's theories can most easily be seen. The sisterhood is soon overpowered by patriarchy when the women forget what is most important. The rules of patriarchy destroy the sisterhood--not allowing them to continue an alternative life. As adolescents, Sula and Nel have the freedom of choice, but as women functioning in a patriarchal society, those choices are soon erased.
Morrison writes of another adolescent pair that fails against patriarchal forces in the characters of Felice and Dorcas of *Jazz*. Felice is present at the party where Joe Trace shoots and kills Dorcas. According to Felice, Dorcas liked to "push" too hard. She enjoyed danger and pushing people to perform dangerous acts for her. She liked thinking of life like a picture show with herself being the one "on the railroad track, or the one trapped in the sheik's tent when it caught on fire" (*Jazz*, 202). Because of this, Felice does not seem at all surprised when Dorcas dies a violent death. Dorcas simply pushed Joe too far, according to Felice. What Felice feels after Dorcas dies is anger, abandonment and what appears to be jealousy. She resents Dorcas for dying and for not thinking of her at the end.

I was right there, right there. Her best friend, I thought, but not best enough for her to want to go to the emergency room and stay alive. She let herself die right out from under me with my ring and everything and I wasn't even on her mind. (213)

Angrily Felice says, "I didn't go to the funeral. I saw her die like a fool and was too mad to be at her funeral. . . . I hated her after that. Anybody would. Some friend she turned out to be" (205). And so, like Nel, Felice is left alone. Unlike Nel, Felice feels no love for Dorcas after her death—only anger. Felice has no desire to find a man and act like the other girls after what happened to Dorcas, wanting a job so that she can support herself. Felice reacts as Sula does—amazed and resentful that her "sister" could reject the strength of their friendship for a man. Both girls feel that the love of a "sister" is the more important and powerful form of love—that men are necessary but secondary to the love of a good woman.

Morrison illustrates the power of a successful pair of sisters in her 1977 novel, *Song of Solomon*. This time, however, the strength of sisters is hindered.
by a male-dominated household and by a mother who cannot give up the past, and the patriarchal oppressors are members of the same household. First Corinthians and Magdalene are actually minor characters in this novel that centers its attention on their brother, Milkman Dead. They appear in few scenes and usually through the viewpoint of Milkman, not always a reliable source in his analysis of women. "He had never been able to really distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother" (Song of Solomon 68). So, Milkman sees his sisters as an extension of his mother, a woman that he respects very little.

In describing her childhood experience of the Deads' Sunday drive in Macon's large green Packard, Lena explains her feelings about her father's ritual: "First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon" (Song 218). The girls are Macon Dead's possessions, like his Packard, his wife, and all of his properties. As Lena says, "...there are all kinds of ways to pee on people" (215). But Lena does finally stand up against the Dead men when they threaten her sister's only chance for happiness. Slapping her brother, she shouts,

What do you know about somebody not being good enough for somebody else? And since when did you care whether Corinthians stood up or fell down? You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, and judging us... (Song 217)

Lena tells Milkman that he believes himself better than his sisters because of "that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (217). But she assures him that he will "need more than that" to survive in the world. Lena, like Pilate, knows much more than Milkman, but does not speak out until her sister's happiness is at risk.
Not having had much of a childhood, sharing the pain of their oppressed lives along with their mother, Lena and Corinthians finally stand up for themselves. Because they stand together they are strong enough to eventually rebel against Milkman and Macon. Lena assures Milkman, "I don't make roses anymore, and you have pissed your last in this house" (218). Although the sisterly relationship is not nearly so clearly defined in the characters of Lena and Corinthians as it is in Frieda and Claudia, Lena's words are filled with spirit and strength when she feels that Milkman is hurting her sister. She is protective and fierce in her threats against her brother's seeming lack of concern. These young women do not rebel against their mother, because she is just as oppressed and powerless as they are. The girls do not seem to blame their mother as much as sympathize with her, since they are all brutalized by the same men. And so, once again, Morrison's patriarchy, unlike Payant's, does not cause women to fight against one another but instead to unite in battle against Dead men.

Although Morrison sisters often come in pairs as seen in the above cases, they also frequently appear in groups of three, revealing an alternative to patriarchy's definitions of a woman's role. These triads often run their households free of any male residents--although there are frequent visitors. Some of the women are blood relations, often from two or three generations, but they operate as equals and behave, many times, as adolescents. Morrison seems to indicate a strength in this women's power of three that is not present in other households. Morrison attributes this interest in female triads to her own memory of her great-grandmother's coming to visit her mother and grandmother. In an interview with Anne Koenen, she describes a childhood scene in which the three powerful women were sitting together and how struck
she was with how much her grandmother looked and acted like a girl in her
great-grandmother's presence. This memory was one of the stimuli for writing
about the three-generation household, but also Morrison claims that she "got
interested in a woman producing a woman producing a woman in a kind of non-
male environment, and each generation has a different problem" (Koenen 78-
79). Morrison admits to repeating the pattern in Song of Solomon that she
started in Sula.

In The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness" Denise Heinze claims that
Morrison uses these all women triad households in earlier novels but then
abandons them for more "complex and bizarre" families in her later novels
(Heinze 66). What Heinze does not show is that Morrison not only continues to
use the triads in later novels, but she also builds on their strength and function
as women grow with sisterly strength toward a larger community. Morrison
criticizes the focus on traditional nuclear families, claiming that they do not work
for black or white people. "It isolates people into little units—people need a
larger unit" (Morrison, Playing 17). Morrison does not intend any of these
families to be considered "bizarre." Barbara Hill Rigney discusses the female
triad in Morrison's novels in their regard to "female space." Rigney describes
the homes of Pilate, Eva, and Baby Suggs as houses that "exude exoticism, just
as do the women who live in them" (Rigney 15). She sees these homes as
"testament to female power and autonomy" (15). Rigney explains the economic
necessities of these women living together and the "instinctual desire for the
mother" (15).

Through her women's triads, Morrison gives other examples of
successful alternatives to the patriarchal role of women. The first appearance of
this female triad is in The Bluest Eye with the three prostitutes who live in the
apartment above the Breedloves. Marie, China, and Poland befriend Pecola or at least, "do not despise her" (Bluest Eye 43). To Pecola, they live charmed, happy lives. The women tease and laugh with one another although their jokes make little sense to Pecola with her many questions about love and sex. In one scene Marie says that she has not seen a boy since 1927, because after that people started getting born old.

"You mean that's when you got old," China said.
"I ain't never got old. Just fat."
"Same thing."
"You think 'cause you skinny, folks think you young? You'd make a haint buy a girdle."
"And you look like the north side of a southbound mule."
"All I know is, them bandy little legs of yours is every bit as old as mine."
"Don't worry 'bout my bandy legs. That's the first thing they push aside." (The Bluest Eye 44-45)

And then they laugh. These are the conversations to which Pecola listens and watches so intently, probably not really understanding the humor in the women playing the dozens—ridiculing one another in fun and teasing one another about age, love, and beauty. But even though she may not get the joke, she enjoys the laughter—something these women do often.

All three of the women laughed. Marie threw back her head. From deep inside, her laughter came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea. China giggled spastically. . . . Poland, who seldom spoke unless she was drunk, laughed without sound. (45)

Pecola enjoys visiting the home of the prostitutes because it is a home. Each woman shares in its strength, balancing their needs equally among the three. All of them have strong, individual personalities—Marie loves food and talking about food; Poland "forever ironing, forever singing" and China "forever and forever curling her hair" (44). But each time that Pecola visits, they are sitting
together preparing for the evening and teasing one another. In a world that contains so little laughter, the sisterhood of these three prostitutes is a welcome relief for Pecola and serves as example of an alternative lifestyle.

Although some may insist that these prostitutes are a patriarchal construction, that is certainly not the picture painted by Morrison. What is most interesting about Morrison’s prostitutes is not only their laughter, but also their own complete acceptance of their lifestyle. These prostitutes are very different from the prostitutes that can be found in most novels. They did not fall into their trade by accident, nor do they do their work as a generous favor to needy men, nor do they have any desire to settle down some day with the right man. They do not take drugs and do not have a pimp. They, in fact, hate men—all men, regardless of race. “They took delight in cheating them” (48).

On one occasion the town well knew, they lured a Jew up the stairs, pounced on him, all three, held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out of the window. (48)

They do not respect many women either except “good Christian colored women,” those with spotless reputations who take care of their families like Mrs. MacTeer. The three women are like family—like sisters who work together and laugh together. To Pecola, they are free and they know what it is to be loved. Morrison’s prostitutes represent alternatives to patriarchal constraints—illustrating a strength in the community of three.

In Sula, Eva, Hannah, and Sula are members of another three-woman household. Like the prostitutes of The Bluest Eye, they also have a steady stream of men coming and going, whether to visit Eva and play cards or for a quick visit with Hannah in the pantry. The difference, however, in this household is that Eva remains very clearly in charge as head of household and
Sula is very clearly the child. They do not share the "sister" relationship at any point in Morrison's narrative. Perhaps Eva and Sula are both too strong-willed to allow themselves to share power. They fight for control until Sula puts Eva in a nursing home so that she can have the house to herself after her mother's death. Eva does not share her love and is too head-strong to participate in a triad.

In Song of Solomon, there are two contrasting households of three women. Ruth, Corinthians, and Lena from the richest black family in town live a very different life from Pilate, Reba, and Hagar who make their living by selling their own homemade liquor. In spite of their luxuries, Ruth and her daughters are not nearly as happy as Pilate's family. Perhaps the constraints of their male-dominated household keep Ruth and her girls from ever knowing happiness.

Ruth and her daughters act as sisters in a male-dominated, female-persecuted household, sharing in the struggles of their oppressed lives. Because Macon cannot understand or accept Ruth's actions, he shuns her as well as their daughters, and they remain powerless throughout much of the book, becoming Macon's show pieces, not his family. The three women are treated with the same dislike and are rarely given the courtesy of any distinguishing remarks. Milkman even has trouble telling his sisters apart because he has never seen them as distinguishable beings. Ruth's three woman household has none of the warmth or even the love that shows so clearly in Pilate's. Morrison uses this contrast to show the limits of sisters in a home ruled by patriarchy.

Pilate, Reba, and Hagar live much happier lives in their woman-centered world. Their life is filled with laughter and music much like the prostitutes' lives in The Bluest Eye. Pilate even chews on a straw just as Marie does. Even
though Pilate is Hagar's grandmother and Reba her mother, the three women share in the daily decisions of their lives. Like sisters, they talk about men and love, and like sisters, they work together in completing the chores and work of their lives. They spoil one another and laugh with one another like adolescent girls. Both Macon and Milkman sit outside and listen to the music of their voices in the night. Men enter their home to visit and buy their liquor. They are shunned by much of the community and envied by the rest, just as the prostitutes are, and, like the prostitutes, they are completely happy with the life they lead. Their strength remains secure until Hagar pulls away to escape in her insanity over Milkman. Until then, the triarchy remains strong. Once again, Rigney blames the grandmother—this time for loving her granddaughter too much, claiming that this love is “more destructive and more tragic than Hagar’s love for Milkman” (Rigney 48). But, Pilate cannot have been wrong for loving her granddaughter. If Eva did not love enough, and Pilate loved too much, how can they be to blame? Hagar is lost when she chooses Milkman over herself and the women who love her—when she chooses the power of patriarchy over the triad.

These women are not “passive” as described by Patrick Bjork. Nor do they dream through men. Bjork claims that the women in Pilate’s household... appear free-flyers who project a self-sustaining image. But never does their alienation, their awareness, or their apparent freedom lead to a positive engagement with the community. They remain decentered, disengaged, and are even killed off in the text. (Bjork 95)

If that were true, then why do all of the male characters find themselves waiting in the darkness outside Pilate’s home, enthralled by the women’s music and voices? Why must Milkman find the secrets of his life and his heritage through
the women of his life? Bjork could not be more wrong and misses the entire point of the novel in claiming that it depicts "male mastery over women" (95). Instead, the strength of this triad is very clear throughout the novel. Just because Pilate is killed by a man at the end of the novel does not mean that she is unable to fly. Rubenstein claims that "nearly all the females in Song of Solomon, except for... Pilate are clinging, self-effacing women who are easily humiliated or exploited by men" (Rubenstein 145). While Rubenstein's point is somewhat accurate, it does not illustrate the important exceptions—Ruth's demanding money of Macon for Hagar's funeral, Lena's standing up to Milkman, and key characters such as Circe who lead rather than follow men. Morrison uses this novel to show the strength and knowledge of women, not weakness. Although Morrison depicts individual failures along the way, such as Hagar's death and Ruth's moments with her father, in the end, there is triumph. Through their love and the power of the triad, these women help one another in their struggles against patriarchy—joining their voices in one rich song.

Morrison's sisters protect one another against their own brothers and fathers, boyfriends, clients, and even other women. Primarily, they protect one another against the powers of patriarchy. But they also offer a different way of life—alternatives to the life of mother and wife. Morrison sisters often live together in their own community, safe from the cruelties of the world—at least for a time. The women in these novels depend on community, but the community also depends on the individual women as their love, understanding, and respect spiral and intertwine with one another's spirit in a rich blend. Deep in the night, men like Macon and Milkman and Stamp Paid listen to these women's voices, but the choir sings only for itself.
To illustrate the power of sisterhood, Morrison must also show the women who remain sisterless and lost to the world—unable to find love for themselves or another. These are the characters who do not receive the validation, comfort, or protection of a sister and never find a place in the community. Some escape from the hardships of their lives by going insane. Often, these women are driven by too many responsibilities, or by the loss of love. They are found searching through garbage heaps or they drown themselves in dark wells. Others escape by running away from their problems. Many of these characters who escape from reality do not have the companionship of a sister to “ground” them and give them comfort. According to Rigney, in Morrison, “there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from community, no matter how tragic or futile the operations of that community might be” (Rigney 38). Pecola of The Bluest Eye is Morrison’s best example of a “sisterless” girl who cannot find a place in the community.

According to Paula Bennet in her essay “The Mother’s Part: Woolf and Morrison,” the only real difference in Claudia and Pecola is the difference in their families. She claims, “The Bluest Eye is a novel about two daughters who could have been—but are not—one” (Bennet 131). Pecola, a twelve year old black girl from Lorain, Ohio with an alcoholic, abusive father and a mother who would rather live in a motion picture world or in the home of her white employers than love her own family does not have a chance. Pecola’s world is torturous, frustrating, and, most of all, hopeless. Her desolate existence gives little hope for a happy or even safe future. The only “love” Pecola has ever received has been her father’s incestuous assault. How could she ever grow strong? How could she learn to love herself if she has never been loved? “How do you get
somebody to love you?" (Bluest Eye 29) she asks, and she never really finds an answer.

Pecola is completely alone—sisterless. The coldness of her life is an overwhelming starkness that gives little hope in change, and even when contrasted with the spirit of Claudia and Frieda's, their world is still not at all encouraging. Since these girls view only mothers who are trapped in poverty and isolation, except for the prostitutes, they have no examples of a happy woman's life to give them hope. In fact, the only women who seem at all happy in The Bluest Eye are the prostitutes, for they are the only women who have control over their own lives.

Morrison uses the narration of Claudia and Frieda to put Pecola's life in perspective and illustrate the contrasts of their lives revealing the isolation and despair of a sisterless life. It is important to see through the eyes of Pecola's peers so that questions remain unanswered and crimes remain unjudged. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison says, "I introduced the two little girls, and chose an 'I' for one of them, so that there would be somebody to empathize with her at her age level. This also gave a playful quality to their lives, to relieve the grimness" (Ruas, "Toni Morrison" 97). Claudia and Frieda, with childlike thoughts and understanding, never blame Cholly or Pauline for what happens to Pecola. They certainly don't blame Pecola herself. The adults in the community cannot get beyond this question of blame as they gossip Pecola's life away. Claudia and Frieda know only that Cholly has been "put out on the street," and they have heard that this is the worst thing that can happen to a person. And so they are sympathetic toward Pecola, letting her share in their lives. They try to bring her into their sisterhood and protect her from the cruelties
of adolescence. They, in fact, eventually blame themselves for Pecola's misfortune—they blame themselves for "planting the marigolds too deep."

But the sympathy of Frieda and Claudia are not enough to save Pecola—to make her happy. She still searches for the blue eyes that she feels will save her from the torment and pain of her life. By the end of the book, Pecola seems to have reached what most people would label insanity. She speaks to herself in convincing conversations about her beautiful new eyes. Is this insanity? She truly believes that her eyes are blue. Oddly enough, even if she is insane, her new life seems better in some ways than her last. She certainly shows more courage and spirit in her newfound blue-eyed state. She no longer seems lonely or depressed as she enjoys the company of her new self. Is she insane? Yes, probably. Is she escaping from reality? Yes, most definitely, but with a reality like Pecola's, perhaps insanity is the better choice. What other choices does her community give? There aren't any psychologists to listen to her agony over her father's incestuous assaults. Her mother is escaping to her white employers and refuses to give any attention to her own daughter anyway. Her only friends are prostitutes and two young black girls who don't have any more power than she does. What are her choices? She lives in a home with no love and a community with no hope, and so she creates her own sister, a friend to convince her that she is beautiful and to give her confidence. A self-made sister, however, is no replacement for the reciprocal relationship of a real sisterhood. Pecola needs more than a reflection. She needs the warmth and love of a sister that she can touch—not her own mirrored image.

Pecola is quite convinced of her ugliness, as is the rest of her family. They have no pride or sense of self-worth which is apparent in the way they dress and the way they act and live.
The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly.

(The Bluest Eye 34)

As Morrison's novel explains, the Breedloves are ugly not so much because of isolated features but because of their own "conviction" that they are ugly. Each Breedlove deals with this ugliness in her or his own way, with Mrs. Breedlove using hers in her role as a martyr, Cholly in violence, Sammy "as a weapon to cause others pain," but Pecola using hers to hide behind, "concealed, veiled, eclipsed--peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask" (35). So, this "ugliness" plays a constant role in Pecola's life--isolating her and setting her apart from any other children or adults. Her belief in her own ugliness marks Pecola as a freak, keeping her from having the confidence to find a friend, but because she does not have the friend, she cannot find any love for herself.

Several key incidents reveal the power of this "ugliness" over Pecola's entire life. In one scene that involves Mrs. Breedlove's anger at her husband for not waking up to get firewood and the resulting violent fight between her parents, Pecola prays to disappear. "Please, God, please make me disappear" (39). This seems to be her routine method for dealing with the battles between her alcoholic, abusive father and her violently angry mother.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. . . . Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to her elbow. Her feet now. . . . The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went
away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. ... Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. 

The word "always" shows that Pecola often uses this method of escape, but it also indicates her inability to totally disappear. Her eyes are always left behind. She cannot stop seeing the ugliness of her family and home. She truly believes that if she were pretty, the entire scene would be completely different. "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (39). The description of Pecola's school life reveals her complete lack of comfort, love, and companionship regardless of where she is.

Pecola's "ugliness" must have been taught to her. The school community must be partially to blame since her teachers seat her to herself while every other child has a partner. They refuse to look at her, perhaps because she is already lost and they do not know how to help, but an adolescent's self concept is determined primarily by the community's perception of that individual. With Pecola's classmates, teachers, and family making her think she is ugly, she believes it completely. Payant claims that Pecola is victimized on all sides. "Pecola Breedlove's story shows her complete victimization by both white and black culture. ... Pecola has no way to invent herself because she and her family totally accept white standards of beauty, and according to them, Pecola is ugly" (Payant 168). Payant also describes the pressures put on black women, saying they "labor under a twofold yoke: the impossible standards of beauty of white culture and the importance their own culture places on female beauty" (168).

In her book The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness," Denise Heinze explains the crippling effects of these beauty stereotypes by saying, "Idealized
beauty has the power to disenfranchise a child of mother love, to psychically splinter an entire race identity, and to imprison all human beings in static and stagnant relationships" (Heinze 15). Heinze claims that “Morrison rejects those standards of beauty—perhaps even the possibly variant ones that once elected her beauty queen—that exclude and torment the majority of women torn between self-love and self-loathing" (16). Heinze also writes of Morrison’s attention to colorism, commenting on the present day fad of blacks wearing blue contact lenses. Gaining the “bluest eye” has become a much easier feat. Pecola’s downfall is brought about by more than beauty prejudice, however, since Claudia and Frieda do not fit the patriarchal definition of beauty, but they live happily or at least do not end up in the garbage heaps. Pecola suffers more from the lack of a friend, someone to tell her that it is alright that she does not have blue eyes, someone to tell her that brown eyes are, in fact, pretty too. She needs to love herself, but she cannot do that without someone to love her first.

Morrison claims in a 1981 interview with Charles Ruas that one of the reasons for writing The Bluest Eye was “about the whole business of what is physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else, and how devastating that was and yet part of all females who were peripheral in other people’s lives” (Ruas, “Toni Morrison” 95-96). In Boundaries of the Self, Roberta Rubenstein addresses some of the same issues, calling Claudia and Pecola “doubly excluded” due to their gender and skin color (Rubenstein 128). Mary Helen Washington also addresses the issue of color intimidation and female beauty, claiming that this is often a part of narratives about the oppression of black women (Rubenstein 128). While Morrison’s stand is very clear in her novels that skin color has little to do with self-worth, Heinze draws attention to Morrison’s many strong black-black women characters like Eva and
Pilate and the many light-skinned undesirables such as Maureen Peal (Heinze 21). In other words, Heinze is accusing Morrison of her own brand of color and beauty prejudice. Of course, Morrison is working to reverse stereotypes, which sometimes requires the use of stereotype reversals. Pecola suffers from her own self-image and the constant reminders that she does not fit any of the white patriarchal standards of beauty, but she suffers more from not having someone to help her love herself. She needs to hear someone speaking the words of Baby Suggs, “Love yourself,” and she needs to feel that love.

Similar self destruction occurs in Song of Solomon within the character of Hagar who, like Pecola, becomes convinced that she is ugly—or, at least, undesirable. Hagar eventually dies because she believes that she was rejected for her lack of beauty, while Milkman may not have felt that way at all. Heinze describes this as a confusion of values between men and women (Heinze 32). Rubenstein claims that both Hagar and Ruth, both emotionally dependent women, attach themselves to Milkman because they need him “to validate existence” (Rubenstein 136). In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison points out the dangers of women formed without men and men formed without women, particularly at an early age of development. She points to this as one of the causes of Hagar’s frailty (Ruas, “Toni Morrison” 106). Hagar’s wandering the streets in the rain is much like Pecola’s end, but Hagar has had the love of her mother and grandmother. Hagar is more a victim of her own self-destruction, for she will not listen to Pilate or even Guitar’s pleas.

Because Pecola cannot see any beauty, she resorts to prayer—prayer for blue eyes, because “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (The Bluest Eye 40). Pecola believes that if her eyes were blue, then no one would want to do anything wrong in front of her
and the whole family would be different. They would say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (40). Thus, Pecola believes that her ugliness contributes to the fall of her family—that she cannot make conditions better without a miracle. She must have blue eyes, "Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes" to be beautiful. And since she believes that only a miracle can save her, "she would never know her beauty" (40).

Pecola cannot see her own beauty, her own self because she is convinced by her community that this is something she will never have.

Because no one else loves dandelions, Pecola believes that she cannot. Because no one loves Pecola, then Pecola believes that she cannot. After being misunderstood and belittled at Mr. Yacobowski's candy store, Pecola reflects on the incident with shame, and then begins noticing the dandelions. She believes dandelions are pretty and wonders why no one likes them, but when the dandelions do not send love back to her she says, "They are ugly. They are weeds" (43). Pecola trips on the cracked sidewalk and becomes angry, which is described as a healthy emotion, "a reality and presence. An awareness of worth" (43). But Pecola cannot direct that anger toward Mr. Yacobowski. It simply disappears when she thinks of him. She does not have enough self-worth to feel anger toward him. Paula Bennett explains, "Pecola's inability to hold onto her anger is a direct result of Pauline's similar inability" (Bennett 133). Bennett, using Rich's footbinding analogy, explains how Pecola "has absorbed her mother's acceptance of victimization" which keeps her from defending herself (133). Bennett goes on to explain how "the mother's sense of inadequacy, projected onto her child, leads the daughter—like Pecola—into passivity (a silence) that will make her destruction inevitable" (136). The only problem with this theory is that it lays continual blame on the mother, which
means that Pauline's mother was to blame before her and her mother's mother
before that. This endless pattern of blaming the mother does not get to the root
of the problem. "Like Pauline and her daughter, she [the victim] will silently
acquiesce in society's and her father's rape" (136). Because of her mother and
her society's treatment of Pecola, she loses all chance for sisterhood.

For comfort after leaving Mr. Yacobowski's, Pecola eats her Mary Janes
and thinks about how sweet and good they are.

To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love
Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine
lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a
candy is named.

(The Bluest Eye 43)

Pecola eats the Mary Janes for the same reasons that she drinks milk from the
Shirley Temple glass at the MacTeer home. This appetite for little white girls
allows her to consume her desires and become one with their blue-eyed
beauty. She escapes in their "beauty" to conceal her pain, for Pecola believes
that all that she needs is to "be Mary Jane" and that all of her problems will be
solved. Pecola's rejection and complete isolation and "sisterlessness" leaves
her with only delusions of being what she cannot be.

The only act of affection that Pecola receives from her family is Cholly's
assault. The only touch she ever receives is that of incest. The painful scene
reveals Cholly as very confused—passing in and out of the present as his
memories of Polly as a young girl keep interfering with his view of Pecola. "The
sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (127). He wants
to help her somehow but does not even know where to start, and he is irritated
by the fact that she loves him when he does not feel capable of accepting or
returning that love. Because Cholly cannot think of anything that he can do to
make Pecola happy, because he cannot think of any way to make himself feel
that he deserves her love, because he does not know how to love her or even what to feel for her, Cholly rapes his daughter. He commits this unpardonable act out of feelings of "tenderness" and "protectiveness" for his daughter. This mixture of tenderness and hatred is all that Cholly can feel for his daughter. "The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her" (129).

The only other "kind" act received by Pecola is that of Soaphead Church who believes he is doing the Lord's work, since God had forgotten. And so, Soaphead finds a way to give Pecola what she wants: "... I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You" (143). When Soaphead arranges for Pecola to kill the sick dog in order to prove his miraculous act, Pecola believes that her eyes are finally blue and beautiful. Although she is the only one who will see the blue eyes, that is enough for Pecola, for she seems to completely escape from reality by conversing only with her blue-eyed self. Barbara Christian claims, "The beauty searched for in the book is not just the possession of blue eyes, but the harmony that they symbolize" (Christian 25). According to Christian, Pecola's insanity is a result of not being able to see blue eyes as only a "symbolic aim." Even if the blue eyes were a symbolic aim, however, they represent something that Pecola could not have--except in insanity. Because she is so completely isolated, alone in the world with no "womanfriend," Pecola can only fantasize and actually create another self, someone to tell her she is beautiful. Pecola creates her own sister, someone to share an intimacy, someone to primp with in front of the mirror, someone to be her girlfriend.
In the end, Pecola escapes to madness.

She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. (The Bluest Eye 158)

Pecola spends her days in this manner rummaging in the garbage heaps, laughed at by children, gossiped about by adults. Pecola's misery overwhelms the pages of this novel, as every scene in which she appears reveals a pitiful, helpless creature tormented by her family, peers and community. The only honest comfort she receives is from the Maginot Line, Mrs. MacTeer and her children. Unfortunately, their sorrow and protection cannot compete with the more powerful masculine "comfort" she receives from Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead Church. The men in her life "comfort" her into her own escape from reality and her mother is lost in the movies—the perfect servant who cherishes her white children. Pecola, in the end, is lost to society and any community—female or otherwise.

Pecola has a function in her community—to serve as an example of failures—failure to love children, failure to not be "put out," failure to accept beauty in something other than a definition set by a white world. Pecola's function is to show her community the dangers of "sisterlessness." People could point to her and see the downfall of a people. They could see the results of a home with no love and no hope. And it was by pointing to Pecola that this community of Lorrain, Ohio could feel better about life. "Pecola is necessary to her community," according to Barbara Rigney, because "she cleanses and beautifies it by her own ugliness" (Rigney 54).
Barbara Christian relates Pecola to Sula. She sees the two women as serving the community in the same fashion.

They are women who become scapegoats in their communities because they look at the truth of things and will not or cannot disguise it, becoming the dumping ground for those feelings of helplessness and horror people have about their own lives. Pecola's madness makes everyone feel sane. Sula's evilness highlights everyone's goodness. (Christian 26)

Christian illustrates not only the failure of the community but also its need for Pecola's insanity and Sula's behavior. Rubenstein calls Pecola's position the "bottom of the bottom," illustrating the community's need "to pronounce someone inferior in order to defend a fragile sense of self-worth" (Rubenstein 130). Pecola is her community's protection against the bottom of the barrel. Without someone, a friend or sister to support them and give strength to them, both Sula and Pecola are lost, but both women serve the community.

Patrick Bjork in The Novels of Toni Morrison sees Pecola's insanity as a triumph over her condition. While the community remains unchanged, Pecola has changed her existence. He also claims, however, that Claudia survives to testify to the "unnaturalness of black life" (Bjork 54). Portraying black life as "unnatural" would hardly seem to be Morrison's agenda. Claudia survives because someone must tell the story for there to be any hope of change. Claudia serves to provide a view of reflection and contemplation and to give the reader a voice with which to identify. Her life is not "unnatural."

Pecola's complete loss and hopelessness is apparent.

The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to
Pecola's community fails her. It does not teach the valuable lessons of self-worth and love. She does not know "how . . . you get someone to love you." Although Claudia and Frieda are unhappy with their position in the world at the bottom of the popularity poll, they do know that they are loved and that they have one another. Because of the strength of their sisterhood—their validation, they have a place in society and will function much as their mother's has. Although Pecola is the victim of incest and a home without love, she is also the victim of "ugliness," or narrow ideals of beauty. Without the warmth of a sister to guide her toward self-understanding and love, Pecola is lost. She is a misfit of Morrison's first portrayal of the black community, a cold and uncaring judgmental world. She is proof that Morrison black women cannot succeed without a sister. They must have the validation, comfort, and protection of one another to survive.
Chapter Four
Among Mothers:
Boundaries of Love and Self in Maternal Narratives

"The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want. . . . If you listen to them, somehow you are able to free yourself from baggage and vanity and all sorts of things, and deliver a better self, one that you like," claims Morrison in an interview with Bill Moyers (Moyers 271). Morrison explains that motherhood is very different from being a daughter or a sister because children make demands that a mother can "live up to" and that they do not need "all that overwhelming love either." Morrison states that being a mother was "the most liberating thing" that ever happened to her (270). She describes motherhood as a freeing relationship unlike any other because children demand things of mothers that are totally different from what others demand in that they ask that the mother become useful today, allowing her to see what is really important in life. Toni Morrison, the woman, believes in motherhood and its importance to her own spirit and selfhood—its ability to bring out her absolute best. Toni Morrison, the writer, builds upon these ideas, but in her novels she also shows how motherhood can bring out violence and rejection rather than warmth and affection. Morrison mothers fail when they are denied or when they refuse the strength of community, proving that the women's choir is as necessary a part of motherhood as it is in sisterhood. Morrison shows that mothers need nurturance before they themselves can nurture.

While a warm, caring spirit is what is most often depicted in literary mothers, Toni Morrison continually calls this stereotype into question by presenting radically unique maternal figures. From The Bluest Eye's Geraldine who experiences her only sexual pleasures when her cat rubs against her legs
to send a thrill through her thighs, and Pauline who adores a white child and hates her own, to Song of Solomon's Pilate who has no navel and carries her father's bones in a sack, and Ruth who is passionate with her own father and breast feeds her too-old son, to Helene from Sula who forces her daughter to wear a clothespin on her nose so that it will not look like other black noses—Morrison's depiction of mothers certainly refutes all stereotypes. Many of these women fail to give their children the love and attention they need, while others even choose to end a child's life. These are not the mammies described in the novels of white sentimentalists. They are realistic characters based on real women—not caricatures of maternal goodness. But because these women are "real," they have real problems, real worries, and real failures.

As with Morrison's sisters, her mothers can develop understanding and strength in three different dimensions—self, other, and community. The mother sometimes gains self-knowledge through her offspring, often learning how to love herself through her love of the child since the son or daughter is often viewed as an extension of the self. Mothers can also understand love of other through this relationship with an other that is actually very much like the self—all of which contributes to the love of self. Beyond that, the mother may learn not only about her own place in the community and love of others outside of the self, but she also learns about the child's place in that community. The community for these women is composed primarily of other mothers, which Morrison mothers need in order to help them negotiate proper boundaries. To realize these boundaries, mothers must trust in themselves, the child, and the community. They gain inner strength and internal coherence from themselves, which is important in order for them to gradually relinquish power to the child. Eventually these mothers may entrust the child to the outside world—a difficult
act especially with the cruelties of these women's worlds. Morrison mothers cannot successfully mother without a community of women—past and present—to nurture them and help them nurture, guiding them toward understanding of their boundaries and helping them to trust in the world. Sisterhood in Morrison is thus of utmost importance to the success of motherhood.

When their boundaries are not clearly defined, Morrison mothers often fail their children, usually in one of two ways—either through rejection or sometimes even through violence. They may reject their own child simply by desiring her or him to have a different appearance such as Helene Wright wanting Nel to wear a clothespin on her nose so that it will appear less like a black child's. Geraldine will not let her son play with other black children because it will make him seem like a "nigger." Some reject the child by actually abandoning it, as in the case of Cholly Breedlove's mother. Some abandon the child by committing suicide, as does Violet Trace's mother or through insanity as does Joe Trace's mother. Some of Morrison's mothers commit violence against their children as in Margaret's abuse of her son. And some Morrison mothers actually kill their children as is the case of Sethe and Eva. While Morrison mothers commit these acts due to a failure of community—sometimes because the mothers refuse any help and sometimes because they are not offered any help—the real problem is a question of understanding boundaries. In Morrison's novels, other mothers often try to help the mother successfully raise the children. These other mothers sometimes step in to save the child but very often they also save the mother. Their attempts are not always successful—sometimes because the help comes too late, sometimes because patriarchal forces are too strong, but in all of Morrison's novels, the role of community is just as important for mothers as it is for sisters and daughters. Those who have the comfort of a
network of other women are much more successful in facing the daily battles and challenges of their worlds than are those women who allow themselves to be separated or treated as freaks. According to Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum in *Between Women*, a mother has as much need for attachment as a daughter or sister. “Women know themselves through their connections to others” (Orbach 51). A mother has an urgent need for a connection with other women. Morrison mothers cannot mother alone. Solo performances are once again unsuccessful.

Morrison mothers often fail when they try to mother alone—when they do not seek or allow the help of other women. Without the strength of community, Morrison mothers find it difficult to know their boundaries because they cannot trust the world to be a safe place. The community provides a safe haven for mother and child, giving support through advice or comfort as well as stepping in to actually raise the child if the mother needs assistance. The community, in fact, performs the same role as the mother by nurturing, supporting, and freeing the mother. Like a black women’s choir, this group of women responds with and to one another sometimes in antiphonal singing, the call and response of women’s voices. When one woman sings out either in joy or pain, the group responds by answering her call with a response of its own or with an echo of her call. So, the community may give advice and guidance or just support, depending on the needs of the individual. But the individual also responds if the community calls to her. The harmonies flow smoothly through women’s space as these mothers respond to each other’s needs.

In Morrison’s fiction, this community of women sometimes includes family members—mothers and grandmothers, both dead and alive—but it also involves other women outside the family who sometimes step in to raise the children.
According to Marilyn Mobley in *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison: The Cultural Function of Narrative*, in Morrison, “the word *mother* refers not simply to a biological relationship but to those women who provide the nurturing associated with mothering” (139). In Morrison, an “othermother” can therefore be a member of the family or a concerned community member. Othermothers might step in to raise the children when the mother has failed because they will not let the children suffer, while at other times, they step in to save the mother. Morrison’s development of this theme can actually be traced through the growth of “her mothers” from the uncertainties of Mrs. MacTeer and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye* to the headstrong Eva of *Sula* and Pilate of *Song of Solomon* to Ondine’s warmth in *Tar Baby* and finally to Sethe in *Beloved*, certainly one of her most interesting mothers. Each of these mothers possesses qualities that Morrison feels are very important to their blackness, their womanhood, and their motherhood, but each of them also produces damaging effects on children when they do not realize their boundaries. While some of Morrison’s mothers are quite successful in raising their children, others are still struggling, some even losing the battle—the Gertrudes and Ruths and Margarets. The complexities of all of these characters keep them from being categorized with simple labels, for each one has many sides—many strengths and weaknesses. There are no simplicities, no blacks and whites in Morrison’s mothers, but there is the ever present need for each other, the need to nurture and be nurtured.

Morrison often structures her fictions through the use of contrasts in illustrating the effects of mothers on their children to show the influence of community in the lives of some mothers and its stark absence in the lives of others. Roberta Rubenstein in *Boundaries of the Self* describes the use of
contrasting families in Morrison's development of her narratives (Rubenstein 139-140), centering her discussion on the differences between the MacTeers and Breedloves, the Dead families, the Peace and Wright families, and the Streets and Childs families. While Rubenstein's analysis is clear, in truth the contrasts in these families are established by the singular personality and beliefs of one individual in each household—the matriarchs. Morrison's emphasis on the importance of a mother's role can most easily be seen in the power each of these individuals holds over a family's entire self-concept and existence. With Beloved, however, Morrison abandons such a rigid use of contrasting figures, and instead develops the character of Sethe out of these other maternal figures. Sethe is, indeed, Morrison's most often discussed mother, for none call the maternal stereotype into question quite so strongly as Sethe, since this is the story of a woman who expresses her love and maternal instincts by murdering her own child. Some of the conflicts of Morrison's "motherful" novel, Beloved—especially Sethe's pain over the loss of her mother—are given further reflection in Jazz, her "motherless" novel, a book filled with motherless children. Jazz is filled with characters remembering the loss of their mothers, illustrating that the effects of a mother are far reaching—even if she is not present. Once again, Morrison uses contrasts to illustrate her point. The absence of mothers is as important as the presence of mothers in examining the effects on their children.

One of the most important parts of Morrison's depiction of community is its dependence on heritage, since a community's strength relies on its knowledge of the past and its awareness of the present. The heritage of Morrison's mothers comes from two directions—Morrison's own experience as a mother and the actual historical events and figures that affect fact and fiction.
To understand Morrison's development of mothers from *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*,
the literary and historical heritage of these women deserves some attention.
The rich heritage of Morrison mothers can be traced through Morrison's own background as a mother and through slave narratives and historical evidence.
The non-fictional accounts of mothers help to illustrate and clarify the behavior of their fictional descendants. Although tracing all of the heritage of Morrison's mothers would be almost impossible, looking at her own mothering and its influence as well as some of the slave narratives that have influenced her writing will aid in this analysis. Knowing and appreciating one's ancestry is of absolute importance to Toni Morrison the woman and writer. Morrison shows us that community begins with the past since a woman's ancestors are also part of her community. Morrison's characters are influenced and strengthened through spiritual relationships with the dead as much as they are with women of the present. Both Ruth and Pilate have posthumous relationships with their fathers just as Sethe and Denver communicate with Baby Suggs long after she is dead.

The ancestry of Morrison's mothers, however, must begin with Morrison herself, who in a conversation with Gloria Naylor, attributes her whole purpose in writing to her own children—her own need to be a good mother.

I was really in a corner. And whatever was being threatened by the circumstances in which I found myself, alone with two children in a town where I didn't know anybody, I knew that I would not deliver to my children a parent that was of no use to them. So I was thrown back on, luckily, the only thing I could depend on, my own resources.

(Naylor 576)

Because Morrison herself could not be a "useless parent," she will not allow her mother characters to remain useless—not without some suffering either by the child, the mother, or both. In other interviews, Morrison describes the rich family life she had as a child and later as an adult. Soon after she found herself "alone
with two children," she returned home to Lorain, Ohio to the mother and family that had shown her the importance of community. Morrison's memories of the ghost stories and magic of her grandmother, the woman who won money off her granddaughter's dreams, are very much a part of her own family heritage. Morrison retells her memories of being assigned to read the Bible to her grandmother and watch over her senile grandfather to show the importance of generations and heritage. According to Morrison, "I was very conscious of trying to capture in writing about what black life meant to me" (Ruas, Conversations 223). Morrison not only learned how to be a mother herself from this rich heritage of women, but she also passes on that strength to her own literary mothers.

Another important influence on Morrison's mothers is their real-life ancestors. These historical figures, in a sense, are the mothers of Morrison's characters and are the first members of the community that influence her mothers' growth. The slave narratives have been used in studies for many years to understand the constructs of black families in America and, specifically, to analyze the role of the black mother in both white and black homes. Hazel Carby, in Reconstructing Womanhood, explains the stereotypes of black women that began in America with the slave narratives. She shows that "the image of a strong, nonsubmissive black female head of a household did not become a positive image . . . but it became a figure of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of masculine power" (39). She also shows that slave narratives written by men showed brutalized and oppressed women, while those written by women revealed the strength and power of these matriarchs. Carby encourages a more careful analysis of the narratives toward understanding black women in the role of motherhood. E. Franklin Frazier's
book *The Negro Family in the United States* has been used over the years as an analysis of the slave narratives and proof of the black slave woman's strength and devotion to her white family. Frazier’s analysis shows the incredible power of the slave woman with little or no help from slave men. He also supports the belief that the slave woman was the dominant figure in the household and especially in child rearing (Frazier 60). Recently, however, in DuBois and Ruiz's book, *Unequal Sisters*, Deborah Gray White discounts Frazier, saying that "male slaves were more than just visitors to their wives' cabins" (DuBois 30). In her analysis, "slave women did not play the traditional female role as it was defined in nineteenth-century America, and regardless of how hard we try to cast her in a subordinate or submissive role in relation to slave men, we will have difficulty reconciling that role with the plantation realities" (DuBois 30). She describes these women as strong but dependent on other slave women. They were women who,

... identified and cooperated more with other slave women than with slave men. ... Added to these elements of female interdependence and cooperation were the realities of chattel slavery that decreased the bondsman's leverage over the bondswoman, made female self-reliance a necessity, and encouraged the retention of the African tradition which made the mother-child bond more sacred than the husband-wife bond. (DuBois 30)

White's analysis emphasizes the reliance of slave mothers on each other—dependent on one another for their strength, a facet of slave life that Morrison shows in the story of Sethe’s mother. These mothers knew that they could not mother alone, that they were dependent on each other to successfully raise the children. Morrison's fictional characters, many of whom are based on specific
accounts from the slave narratives, are also dependent on their community of women to help them mother their children.

Without that community—past and present—and without the knowledge and respect for heritage, Morrison's mothers often fail. In each Morrison novel, "failure" in mothering is clearly revealed in one specific mother. Although other mothers in the novel may struggle and make mistakes, Morrison uses one figure to represent the greatest failure. That is certainly not to say that Morrison wishes to represent these women as failures, or that she expects the reader to point a disapproving finger at these mothers. Easy judgment is never Morrison's technique. Instead, Morrison portrays these figures in their societies as women who have been led astray in their mothering, showing specific reasons for their failures. The Bluest Eye’s Pauline, Sula’s Eva, Song of Solomon’s Ruth, Tar Baby’s Margaret, Beloved’s Sethe, and Jazz’s Rose Dear all commit crimes that most societies would term unforgivable. One prefers a white child to her own, another breast feeds her too-old son, one physically abuses her child, one commits suicide, and two kill their children. All of these are horrible things to do to children, but labeling them as horrible is not enough. Nancy Chodorow in Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory begs that we move beyond extremist assumptions and fantasies and warns against creating monsters out of mothers. "Insofar as we treat mothers as larger than life... we deny mothers the complexity of their lives, their selfhood..." (92). Morrison's mothers have received tremendous criticism because of their mistreatment of their children. Chodorow's comments warn against this kind of attack. Shari L. Thurer examines The Myths of Motherhood in her 1994 book, examining popular trends such as mother bashing. She discusses the portrayal of "monster mom" in novels and movies and the many stories told by celebrity children in attacking
their mothers (293). But Thurer sees Sethe as part of an important new tradition of telling the mother's story from the mother's point of view. She criticizes the past trend of treating mothers as "objects—not subjects" and applauds popular culture's images such as Murphy Brown, a strong, unmarried mother. According to Thurer, women are being portrayed with real faults and strong qualities—real women. She is complimentary of Morrison's portrayal of Sethe from a mother's point of view, saying that Sethe "is no one's bad mother" (299). Morrison's mothers have reasons for their actions—reasons for committing the unforgivable which makes it forgivable. In Morrison, the failures in mothering are failures of society, of the world. Blaming the mother does not give answers for the future.

Morrison mothers often fail when they do not have other women, heritage, and community to support and guide them. Without this guidance and confidence in the world around them, mothers find it difficult to learn their boundaries—where does the child begin and the mother stop?—when does a child become an adult?—when is the world safe?—how do children survive patriarchy? A community of women can help mothers answer these questions and feel secure in the world. If the community does not provide this guidance or if the mother gets the wrong guidance, then the mother often does not know her boundaries. She does not know how to separate child from self. If the mother does not know her boundaries, then she does not understand the necessity of rejection. In Morrison, both the mother and child need to reject one another at some point in their relationship. After that initial rejection, both mother and child can accept one another as individuals and begin a new relationship. Rejection is an important and necessary step in the process of mothering. Without confidence in themselves, the child, and their world, however, mothers cannot break the ties of mother and child. In other cases, Morrison reveals women who
completely break all connection with the child by total rejection, but these women are also strongly influenced by the community's involvement or by its lack of concern and action. In either case—lack of rejection or total rejection—both mother and child suffer and, in the end, so does the community.

Morrison's mothers often learn that rejection is a difficult art, for if they reject the child too strongly and push her or him completely away, then the child is lost to the mother and her community for good. Instead, the mother must allow the child to grow away from her and must encourage that growth but must continue to maintain the warmth of a nurturing relationship. Eventually, the child must reject the mother as well, but that also requires a delicate balance and a willing mother. This rejection in Morrison's mother/child relationships is often complicated by many outside factors. The most important influence, however, is the community's involvement in the life of the mother and child. Morrison explores the issue of complete rejection in two of her novels—oddly enough, her first and her most recent. Both *The Bluest Eye* and *Jazz* reveal mothers who are completely isolated from their heritage, resulting in extreme cases of depression and, in the end, breakdown of the family.

One of the most important aspects of mothering in Morrison's fiction is the mother's own self-knowledge and love. Mothers must gain inner strength and internal coherence from the self. Just as sisters need this sense of self-strength and purpose, so do mothers. They need to feel good about themselves, and they need to have this strong sense of community in order to pass on a healthy heritage to the child. If the mother cannot sing in the choir then she cannot teach her child how to become a part of this rich, strong community. Morrison mothers who do not have confidence and trust in themselves as individuals cannot find the love and strength needed to be mothers. Of course, the
community must also play its part by welcoming all of its members and helping each mother in times of need. The characters of Pauline of _The Bluest Eye_, Ruth of _Song of Solomon_, and Margaret and Ondine of _Tar Baby_ all search for this inner strength to believe in themselves in order to pass on a valuable heritage to their children.

Even in her first novel, Morrison shows the tremendous influence a mother can have on the health of her children as well as the effects the women's community can have on the mother and, in turn, the child. Pauline Breedlove rejects the black community but only after it rejects her. The call and response of the choir is lost among prejudice and pain. Pauline's deformed foot—which leads to a lack of confidence—and her country ways set her apart from the rest of the community. Having grown up in rural Kentucky where her job was to look after the younger children and do the housework while her mother and father worked, spending her days arranging the pantry and putting the house in order, Pauline is used to isolation. The city, however, and the community there makes her feel ugly in spite of her attempts to dress like other women, and that ugliness is what leads to Pauline's failure to love herself and her own children, teaching them the lesson of fear.

Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother's. Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life. *(Bluest Eye* 102)

Pauline Breedlove runs away from her children whenever she can, for they are a reminder of her own ugliness. Her entire life is controlled by her deformed foot and her feelings of inadequacy. She has no friends and no support system, while Mrs. MacTeer has friends with whom she can sit and discuss life or solve
problems. Pauline has only the movies. Pauline is really no better off than Pecola, because she escapes into the white world just as Pecola wants to.

From the movies, Pauline’s only accepted heritage, she learns to reject her own community that calls her ugly and to practice the art of escape. Her own black home and family offer dirt, rejection and ugliness while the white home is a safe haven of clean, white floors and crisply ironed uniforms. Pauline Breedlove wants to be a part of the white family, assuming the role of mother to the white child in a way never shown to her own black child. For Pauline, a woman who is at the bottom of the bottom, where black women are least powerful of all of American humanity, life as servant to the white family offers much more security and power than she feels in her own home. In the white home, she can have clean white bathtubs and she can give orders to the butcher and delivery boys. At home, her children are the only people that she can control. So, she does to them what the rest of society has done to her—belittles and condemns them. Morrison illustrates the power of a mother over her children, a power that can breed beauty and strength through love or, in this case, pain and torment through fear.

Pauline Breedlove’s rejection of her own child results in the complete devastation and eventual insanity of her child. Claudia and Frieda fear their mother as well, but theirs is a much different fear from that of Pecola. Pecola fears her mother’s physical harm, while the MacTeer girls fear disappointing their mother. They don’t want to displease her—partially because she will use a switch on them but mostly because they seem to want to make her happy. While Pecola sinks beneath the covers and prays to disappear, Frieda and Claudia discuss burning the mustard greens. One incident is painful and scary.
while the other is rather playful and humorous. Both mothers create fear in their daughters but with far different results.

Katherine Payant in *Becoming and Bonding: Contemporary Feminism and Popular Fiction by American Women Writers* explores some of the darker sides of the maternal. She sees that Morrison “exposes the dangerous side of mothering” (168). One of those “dangers” is self-hatred, especially in the case of someone like Pauline Breedlove. Payant describes the overwhelming effects of this problem.

A woman with little faith in herself will pass her self-hatred and passivity to her daughter. As she identifies with the values of her oppressors, her daughter is proof of what she despises in herself. . . . thus, we get a continuity of female self-hatred and helplessness through the generations. (169)

Payant’s description is particularly appropriate in describing the lives of Pauline and Pecola. Pauline’s self-hatred and desire to be white is transferred to Pecola, the daughter she very likely named after the character in *Imitation of Life* who rejects her black heritage to pass for white, but Pauline and her daughter cannot pass for white. They are trapped in their black skins—their ugliness, so they look for escape in other ways—Pauline at the movies and then as the maid in an affluent white home, and Pecola in insanity. Because Pauline cannot love herself, she cannot love her daughter who, consequently, cannot love herself.

Morrison uses Mrs. MacTeer as a contrasting figure to Pauline, and even though she was based on Morrison’s real life mother, she also has some faults. Primarily, she participates in the white patriarchal game by insisting on giving her daughters the blue-eyed dolls that white children receive. She does not rebel against her white oppressors and continues to promote white stereotypes and patterns of beauty, rather than promoting her own definitions of black
beauty. She creates confusion when the girls wonder why they are not loved like the Maureen Peals of the world. Although she does not try to stamp out their blackness as does Geraldine, who will not let her son play with black children, or Helene Wright, who makes her child wear a clothespin on her nose, she does not promote the black traits of her daughters either. While Mrs. MacTeer commits far less harm than Mrs. Breedlove, she is still trapped within the limits of a white, patriarchal world. Both women have accepted a heritage which should not be passed on to future generations—the valuing of white customs and beliefs over black.

While Mrs. MacTeer might outwardly seem hard and cold, still her children feel her warmth and concern. Her daughter, Claudia, speaks of her mother's love in saying, "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house" (Morrison Bluest Eye 14). Mrs. MacTeer watches over her children and even gets angry at them, but they know that they are loved. Morrison claims that the MacTeers are loosely based on her own family life, saying that her mother behaved much like Mrs. MacTeer any time that there was a problem in the house. Mrs. MacTeer, during Claudia's sickness and Pecola's little-girl-gone-to-woman incident, seems very harsh on the surface, but her warmth and love are clear as she handles each of the children with nurturing comfort—leading Pecola into privacy to teach her about menstruation, the job Pecola's mother should have done, and watching over her own daughter during the night. Mrs. MacTeer, although surrounded by the same poverty and oppression faced by Mrs. Breedlove, rises to the challenge and provides a healthy home for her children. But Mrs. MacTeer has help—a loving husband who also protects the family and a community of friends to sit

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
and talk with about life and how to raise children. Mrs. MacTeer has a community—other women to teach and guide her through the difficulties of poverty and parenthood. While Mrs. MacTeer has the richness of a black heritage, Pauline Breedlove has only the coldness of the movies.

Over twenty years later in her sixth novel, Morrison explores a very similar theme through the character of Rose Dear. *Jazz* can be called Morrison's motherless book as most of the characters are reacting to the loss of a mother—some due to death, some through insanity, and one through suicide. While Violet's mother commits suicide by jumping into a well, Joe's mother runs away, Dorcas's dies in a fire, and Felice is raised by her grandmother since her mother and father work in another town. This is a book of absences. What would these characters have been like had their mothers been present to raise and love them? Most of the characters in *Jazz* feel that they were rejected by their mothers, and although they find other mothers and go on with their lives, they are also haunted by this crucial rejection.

Perhaps the most interesting story is that of Rose Dear, Violet's mother, who rejects her children by choosing insanity and eventually suicide. The interesting connection between Pauline of Morrison's first novel and Rose Dear of her most recent novel is their tie to white children. The story of Rose Dear is very similar to Pecola's, since Rose Dear's mother, True Belle, spent eighteen years of her life with her white employer and the child called Golden Gray, whom she loves, adores, and treats as her own. Rose Dear feels rejected by her mother for a white child and even though True Belle is a slave and has no choice, she seems to look forward to life in the big city of Baltimore. Like Pauline, True Belle chooses to love a white child over her own daughters. This rejection by her mother and later her husband seems to be the cause of Rose
Dear's later insanity. Like Pauline, Rose Dear is trapped in a world that values golden hair. Like Pauline, Rose Dear does not learn the art of self love and, therefore, cannot love her children or teach them to love. Like Pecola, she chooses an escape from the pain of life.

Rose Dear's suicide feels like rejection to Violet. Although part of Violet's depression seems to be caused by her own inability to become a mother, since she has had one miscarriage or abortion--an action that is left unclear--she often wonders what made her mother leave her behind. Later, when Violet steals a child and cradles a doll, her "craziness" is shown to stem from this absence of mothering that she feels in herself, even though she worries about passing on her mother's insanity to future generations. Adrienne Rich writes of the opinion held by much of society that any woman who chooses not to have a child remains suspect and is often even considered evil (Rich, Of Woman Born 249). Violet wonders what drove her own mother to the point of jumping in the well, just as Joe wonders why his mother was wild. He too feels rejected by his mother who seems to have been completely insane, a wild woman living in the wilderness. Denise Heinze in The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness" claims that it is this absence of a mother that draws Joe and Violet together to begin with, but that it is also this absence which ultimately drives Joe to adultery, for he cannot take Violet's silence. Heinze shows that this silence reminds Joe of the rejection he felt from his mother (34-35). Morrison shows that rejection by the mother leads to an endless series of other rejections.

All of these characters in Jazz suffer because of their questions about feeling abandoned by their mothers. While the fathers are free to leave in so many other Morrison novels, the children usually grow up feeling loved by their mother or at least another caring woman. But the children in Jazz grow up
feeling rejected by their mothers too. Morrison shows that a mother who flies away from her children causes torment for generations to come. While the community steps in to raise the children, there is still an emptiness in the hearts of Jazz's motherless children that takes years to fill. Other women save the children and give them comfort, but the mothers are lost forever. In Morrison's stories of mothers who completely reject the child, the children not only suffer but pass on the anguish to their own children. Morrison mothers who reject their own heritage for that of a white patriarchal society produce lost souls, just as communities that reject their members who do not fit white patriarchal definitions of beauty produce lost souls. Lost souls produce lost souls. Mothers fail when they are given the wrong choices or when they are given no choices.

Morrison shows an equally crippling problem when mothers refuse to reject the child—when they will not allow separation, or when they continue to feel that the child remains a part of the mother. This lack of separation is also caused by a failure to love the self. These are the mothers who cannot reject the child because they do not have faith in themselves, such as Ruth of Song of Solomon and Margaret of Tar Baby. These mothers do not have the strength of purpose or confidence to love themselves, much less a child. Interestingly enough, both Ruth Dead of Song of Solomon and Margaret Street of Tar Baby—one black and one white—are rather wealthy, suggesting that Morrison's mothers do not always benefit from money or even race. Both women are also somewhat isolated because of their social status and their domineering husbands and both have troubles in mothering a son rather than daughter. Ruth and Margaret continue to crave affection from their sons all of their lives, and because they never separate themselves from these young men, their children eventually reject them, showing that in Morrison when a mother refuses
to reject the child, sometimes the child rejects her. This also proves that Morrison mothers who do not have confidence, knowledge, and love of self have difficulty in separating from the child.

In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth Dead is an influential mother figure, but she clings to her son Milkman for as long as she possibly can until she is discovered breastfeeding the young boy in secrecy. The pain of this memory torments Milkman for years. According to Barbara Christian, Ruth is the “quintessence of the ideal southern lady carried to a grotesque extreme” (Christian 77). A wealthy woman, Ruth does not have the problems faced by many Morrison mothers. Although she is black, she never has to work in a white home and never has to watch her children suffer from cold or hunger. She loved her affluent father deeply, perhaps too deeply. Ruth’s primary problem is low self-esteem due to the effects of a domineering father and husband, neither of whom values her as a person. She is one of Macon Dead’s possessions in his pursuit of white patriarchal success. As a mother, Ruth suffers as a victim of patriarchy’s dominance and is unable to love herself. She has no community, no guidance, except from Pilate who is soon asked to leave the house and is never allowed to return. Macon Dead will not allow his sister to influence his wife, as he wants to keep complete control over her himself. Ruth’s inability to reject her child is caused by this lack of community and self love.

In *Tar Baby*, Margaret, the embodiment of *The Bluest Eye*’s Mary Janes, suffers in a similar household, but she was not born into her wealth. Instead, the beauty queen is a possession for her husband, Valerian Street. Margaret’s background of a poor family puts her in a position in which she feels inferior. Like Ruth, she is unable to separate herself from her child, but instead of the need for touching and nurturing that Ruth experiences, Margaret feels the need
to hurt her child. The physical abuses that she inflicts on Michael are actually a product of her feelings about herself. Margaret's low self-esteem and inability to separate from the child show that Morrison sees problems in mothering in terms of other factors besides race. Margaret's only community is Ondine, the loving mother figure of *Tar Baby* who, like Pilate, is an advisor who speaks frankly to anyone who needs to listen. Ondine and Margaret mother their children very differently. While Margaret abuses her son when he is small, Ondine provides only the best for Jadine. Ondine is the othermother figure who is well-respected by all and who tries to help Margaret. Although the two women are similar in age, Ondine "knows" more than Margaret because she has a rich spiritual side, but because of the complex servant/employer relationship, she is unable to share that knowledge with Margaret. Morrison reveals the belief that a woman's power and knowledge does not depend on her money.

Each of these women experiences difficulties in mothering her children because she is unable to find self-love and strength. Without that inner strength, these mothers cannot pass on strength or even love to the child. In some cases, Morrison shows that the community is at fault for not coming to the mother's aid or for not accepting a mother to begin with. The community of *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's most uncaring community in regard to Pauline and Pecola. The women who reject Pauline because of her country ways fail Pecola as well.

> After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. She was so sad to see. After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright. . . . The damage done was total. *(Bluest Eye* 158)

Morrison's first fictional community is, thus, her coldest—giving no hope for the
future, the narrator claiming that it is "too late" for her town. Morrison shows a strong connection between community support and an individual's ability to find self-worth.

Morrison also shows that the child may be somewhat at fault when the mother/child separation is not complete. For a mother to feel confident in breaking the mother/child ties, she must believe that the child is suitable for the world. She must trust in the child. In *Sula*, the character of Eva Peace struggles in her relationship with her son. Morrison's 1973 novel is her first exploration of the mother murderer. In the novel, Eva Peace is the strength of the community as she issues orders and gives out advice to family and friends. The people of Medallion respect her as a strong and courageous woman who, again like Morrison, has raised all of her children by herself. Most of the townspeople even believe that she sacrificed her leg to get enough money to feed her children. But Eva's greatest sacrifice is the murder of her son, Plum. Once again, a Morrison mother does not know her boundaries. Eva feels that she must take control of the situation by taking control of the child and believes that she has the right to kill the son that she brought into the world.

Even though Eva Peace possibly sacrificed part of herself for her family, she also burns her son to death because he is "bad," and later in the novel, she jumps out of a window to save her other child from burning to death. Eva is a complex character whose sacrifices seem so inconsistent on the surface but so painful at the core. Marianne Hirsch, who considers Eva's missing leg to be a kind of castration, points out the irony of Eva's not being able to save Hannah because of her original mother's sacrifice (Hirsch, "Maternal..." 423). Even more ironic, however, is that she tries heroically to save one child from a fire while she, in fact, set the fire that caused the other child's death. According to
Morrison, "Eva is a triumphant figure, one-legged or not. She is playing God. She maims people" (Parker 255). Eva is a "namer," someone who controls the lives of many people, not just the Deweys that she has named.

Morrison reveals the complexities of Eva's thoughts and motivations for the murder, showing a mother's struggle to choose the right path for her son. Eva, in explaining how she tried to get Plum to be a man and become independent, shows her attempt to gain separation, but he simply lies in his room all day using drugs—a product of the horrors of Plum's war experience and of society's harmful effects. Finally Eva struggles on crutches to her son's room one night and after holding Plum tightly in her arms, "She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight" (Sula 47). In explaining the murder to her daughter, Hannah, later, Eva says that she could not let him continue living as he was.

... a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.

(Sula 72)

Feeling that it would be better for him to die like a man rather than live in his drugged existence, knowing that she cannot make Plum stand on his own, Eva burns him to death. Rigney warns against Morrison mothers who are guilty of destroying their sons (98), but certainly Plum had already destroyed much of himself. Patrick Bjork uses this scene to show what he calls Eva's "lack of a loving, sensitive center. It is a center that long ago was diffused in desperation by her need to assume a position of pragmatic matriarch, possessive and domineering" (Bjork 67). Bjork claims that Eva and Helene are both "driven to
a state of unnaturalness," that they sacrifice love for some sense of order. Bjork
places complete blame on the mother—even though the father is not even
present. Bjorkquist and Niemela in Of Mice and Women speak of “the mother
goddess and her son lover” and how in myths, the son may be castrated or
killed. In these myths, women who generate a life sometimes take it back
(Bjorkquist 267). Although Morrison claims that this novel is very much about
the black community’s reaction to crime, she never reveals the feelings of the
townspeople or even Hannah.

I wanted to know who the black community respected, and what
they considered an outlaw, as opposed to what the ‘legal’ outlaw
was. And what could a person do to become an outcast in that
community, not an outcast in the society at large, so that I could
say something or reveal something, rediscover, recollect
something about the civilization as it existed among black people.

(Cooper-Clark 194)

Perhaps the black community never believes that Eva committed the crime.
Morrison, however, does show Eva’s reaction, and it is apparent as she cries
over Plum that her conscience is not clear. “But I held him close first. Real
close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy” (Sula 72). This pain must only grow
stronger with Hannah’s death. As Eva struggles to reach her burning child, we
see her willingness to sacrifice anything for her children.

Eva’s acts of motherhood include possibly cutting off her own leg to
collect insurance money to save her children, burning one child to death, but
jumping out of a window to save her other child. The reader cannot help but be
amazed at the sacrifices she makes for her children, but also cannot help
questioning these same acts. Eva’s strength and love are evident throughout
the novel, but her decisions are still questionable. Eva cannot trust her child
whose war experiences and drugs have left him “useless” in her mind.
Believing that he is trying to crawl back into the womb, she stops him in the only way she knows, but Eva is "playing God," according to Morrison. The mother who gives a child life does not have the right to take that life away, but a mother like Eva never understands her boundaries.

Eva illustrates a concept described by Barbara Hill Rigney that involves the idea of a mother's protection of her space. Barbara Hill Rigney in The Voices of Toni Morrison writes of Morrison's characters and their need for what she calls "maternal space." Pecola visits the prostitutes because she wants and needs to return to the mother. For her, the prostitutes represent this maternal space. Other Morrison characters, according to Rigney, are searching for this same comfort, a way of returning to the womb. By crawling into her grandmother's bed to die, desiring the "sleep of water," (Sula 128) Sula is returning to the mother's space, the womb. Beloved's desire to return to the womb nearly destroys Sethe. Milkman stands outside Pilate's house listening to the women's voices because he has the same needs as Pecola. Rigney does not mention that Macon Dead also listens to those voices, perhaps searching for what he never got from the mother who died in childbirth. Of course, Plum is the primary example of a character who desires the mother's womb, and Eva fears that he would have succeeded. Sethe crawls into Baby Suggs' bed, like Sula crawls into Eva's. Maternal space is desired by many Morrison characters because it promises warmth and comfort in a harsh, cruel world. Some characters desire it because they never experienced it—or enough of it—as children, while others desire it because they did once experience it and want to return to that level of comfort and peace. Rigney explains that this desire for the return to the womb can be "fraught with danger," more for men than women, but that even Jade fights against being sucked into the quicksand
because she is “suffocating in the womb” (19). Morrison explores a complicated psychological phenomenon in this desire for the maternal, but her ambiguities cannot be resolved without recognizing the unique qualities of individual mothers and their ability to control this space. The mother should have the power to control the womb which is why Eva murders her own son, Plum. Morrison illustrates the need for mothers to be the ones to draw the line, for they are the ones to know the limits of the womb, but they must also find a way to reject the child without murder.

Mothers such as Eva have been blamed for castrating their sons and, in some ways, themselves by not knowing their proper boundaries. “Mothers . . . are the parents who threaten their sons with castration, and whom their daughters blame for their lack of a penis,” according to Chodorow (Reproduction 160). Chodorow brings new theories to Freud, explaining that adults are more likely to have oedipal fantasies than children and that fathers are certainly not free of these tendencies, attacking Freud’s exoneration of fathers. Chodorow’s theories might be used to reveal Eva’s fears of Plum wanting to crawl inside her womb as oedipal fantasies on her part. Some scholars claim that Eva castrated herself with the loss of her leg, but a castration would be a way to limit power and Eva actually gains power and place in the community with the loss of her leg. She becomes a matriarchal figure that many men and women look to for guidance. She could, however, be blamed for castrating Plum. Adrienne Rich comments on black mothers and the power they have over their children.

The Black mother has been charged by both white and Black males with the ‘castration’ of her sons through her so-called matriarchal domination of the family, as breadwinner, decision maker, and rearer of children in one. Needless to say, her ‘power’
as 'matriarch' is drastically limited by the bonds of racism, sexism, and poverty. (Of Woman Born 203-204)

Rich claims that power here is actually "survival-strength, guts, the determination that her children's lives shall come to something even if it means driving them, or sacrificing her own pride in order to feed and clothe them" (204). Sethe and Eva are Morrison's sacrificing mothers who go against all obstacles for their children. Ironically, they are also Morrison's murdering mothers. They do not understand their boundaries--where the self stops and the child begins.

In "Maternal Narratives," Marianne Hirsch claims, "Mothers have ceased to be able to care for sons in the increasingly feminized, though clearly sexual, culture Morrison constructs," (Hirsch 418) referring primarily to Sula. As examples, Hirsch calls on the failure of Ajax's mother to keep him from running away and Shadrack's motherless birth and of course Eva's killing of Plum. These sons that Hirsch describes, however, are grown men that hardly need to be "taken care of." The mothers continue to be blamed, even though the fathers left before even beginning to care for their sons. The mothers receive the blame for failure even when the sons are grown men and certainly capable of living their own lives.

Perhaps the strongest reason a Morrison mother has for failing to reject the child is she believes that the world is an unfit place for her child. Without the strength of a community to give her faith in a harsh, cruel society, mothers have a difficult time in sending their children out. They, instead, keep them to themselves and try to cocoon the child, sheltering and protecting her or him from the horrors of the world. In some cases, these mothers are correct in believing
that the world is unfit for their children. Both Pilate of *Song of Solomon* and Sethe of *Beloved* experience this lack of faith in the worthiness of the world.

Pilate's strength and love supports her own daughter but also provides a sense of safety for Milkman and his friends. Pilate, who becomes a mother to so many, guides Milkman with her wisdom and flight until her death at the end of the novel. Marilyn Mobley calls Pilate an "eccentric old herbalist, shaman, conjure woman, and bootlegger, who nevertheless remains his teacher and spiritual guide" (*Mobley, Folk Roots* 113). Mobley also describes Pilate's eccentric qualities since she lives,

... in a darkened house surrounded by trees, practicing witchcraft and healing and making wine, she is very much rooted in the landscape. On the other hand, the opinion of women in the community that she is 'something that God never made' (144), coupled with her claim to have 'spoken often to the dead' (149), give her a mythical, other-worldly quality.

(Mobley, *Folk Roots* 113)

Pilate is one of Morrison's strongest and yet most eccentric mothers.

Adrienne Rich writes of the strength of non-traditional mothers. "The pain, floundering, and ambivalence our male children experience is not to be laid at the doors of mothers who are strong, nontraditional women; it is the traditional fathers who—even when they live under the same roof—have deserted their children hourly and daily" (*Of Woman Born* 211). Pilate saves Milkman when his own father fails him and when his own mother is too caught up in patriarchy to help. As Mobley says, "she assumes a maternal role by 'mothering' Milkman with spiritual nurturing and by offering him a haven from his 'dead' household" (114). Barbara Hill Rigney calls her an Eve figure as she sits "wide legged" on the steps—a symbol of childbirth according to Rigney (13). But, Pilate is also sitting as a man would, legs spread, as symbol of her freedom and power.
Pilate has no need to close herself in or protect herself, but instead is confident enough to face the world without fear. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison describes Pilate as “a less despotic Eva” for she is less demanding than Eva and has more trust. Morrison admits that “she does behave in a protective way with her children, but that’s purely maternal. That strong maternal instinct is part of her other-worldliness” (McKay 144).

While Ruth lives in a painful, crippling world, much worse than Helene’s, Pilate is very free and free-loving. Ruth represents the life of a woman who has tried to be what white patriarchal society has wanted while Pilate is the non-conformist, living a life of bootlegging and wandering. According to Bjork, Ruth has “lived her life in service to the patriarchal order” (88). Ruth lives a life of oppression even though she has far more money than Pilate. Her house is filled with rich antiques while Pilate’s is very poorly decorated, but Pilate’s riches are far more than Ruth’s as Pilate has a warmth and spirituality that Ruth can never experience.

Morrison sees Pilate as a blend of male and female characteristics and a very “loving, caring woman” according to an interview with Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson (185). In an interview with Bill Moyers, Morrison calls Pilate “a totally generous free woman. She’s fearless. . . . She’s available for almost infinite love” (269). Sula tries to do what men do, but it does not work for her as it does for Pilate. Pilate is a woman who is “earthy” and not a “ball breaker” according to Morrison’s interview with Anne Koenen (81). In the McKay interview, Morrison defends her need for Pilate to die at the end of Song of Solomon, explaining that this was the only way to show just how horrible violence is, but that she also believes that Pilate is “larger than life and never
really dies in that sense. She was not born anyway—she gave birth to herself. So the question of her birth and death is irrelevant" (146).

Pilate's one fault, then, is loving her children so much that they never leave her. While this triad of mother, daughter, and granddaughter is a rich, safe place for all three women, in truth, Pilate has sheltered her children too much, which keeps them from ever learning to live in the world outside of Pilate. Payant describes another "danger" in raising daughters with no significant males in their lives. She uses Pilate's daughter and granddaughter as examples of women who are still dependent on their mothers and who cannot take care of themselves. She shows "the tendency some mothers have to keep their daughters too closely by their sides, not allowing them to develop autonomy" (186). Payant refers to Chodorow but also Kristeva who expresses the need to "cherish the power of motherhood, and at the same time break away from the 'myth of the archaic mother'" (186). Reba and Hagar are unable to both cherish the mother's power and reject the mother. They cannot break the ties.

Pilate is one of Morrison's strongest and most mythical figures. Her rich maternal spirit fills this novel and guides many of its characters. But even Pilate has her limits. She does not trust the world with her children for they are too precious—too much a part of her own being. Having watched her father shot off his own fence, Pilate does not believe that the world is safe for her children. Pilate has also experienced rejection by her community. Women from her past distrust her for her lack of a navel, considering her a freak of nature, possibly a witch. Pilate's faith in herself remains intact only because, as a child, she did not know she was different and never thought of herself as a freak. So, unlike Pecola, Pilate distrusts the world, not herself.
Another mother who has good reason to distrust the world is Sethe of *Beloved*. Sethe sees her children as an extension of herself, but she cannot bear for them to experience the life she has led. They are, in her opinion, her "best thing," so she cannot allow them to suffer the cruelties of slavery as she has. When Morrison decided to write *Beloved* she wanted to explore the search for self.

I started out wanting to write a story about the feeling of Self. Women feel themselves best through nurturing. The clipping about Margaret Garner stuck in my head. I had to deal with this nurturing instinct that expressed itself in murder.

(Clemons, "Ghosts" 75)

Since Morrison's search was the search of a mother who felt she was losing herself to the demands of so many roles, then that became the search for many of her characters as well. Sethe and her many other mothers learn that they cannot live in isolation. They must not only be a part of the community, but it takes all of the community to raise the children. The final lesson that Sethe learns, however, is that she and her children are not one and that she must love herself first before she can nurture them. Sethe's life in slavery has kept her from trusting her children to the world. Davies claims that, "Sethe kills Beloved to hold on to maternal right" (Daly 48). Although her action is "Godlike" like Eva's, her reasons for murder are very different. She simply believes that the world is not to be trusted with her "best thing."

Sethe's heritage is told through this collection of many women's stories. Not only is this love murder a complicated issue in itself, but the members of the community and their reaction to it are even more intriguing. Morrison expertly constructs a character whose community cannot condemn her for this most horrible of all crimes, the killing of one's own child, making Sethe one of the
most complex mothers in all of American fiction. Hirsch claims that Sethe's story "provides, in a sense, the background for the story of Eva" ("Maternal" 428). Sethe's story reveals not only more details about the motivation for a mother murdering her child, but also the community's reaction to that murder. So, to completely understand Sethe's character as a mother and murderer, we must trace her heritage—her mother roots in fact and fiction. By investigating this long history of Morrison mothers, we can not only better understand Sethe's actions, but also the community's acceptance of those actions. More importantly, the strengths and necessity of relationships among women in building a powerful community can be seen through the eyes of the mother. Like their daughters, these mothers need the strength of a women's community to survive in their harsh world.

Sethe's heritage comes from the real life story of Margaret Garner, who not only killed her child and went to jail but was also returned to slavery where she was "sold down the river." Charles Scruggs in *Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel* claims that Margaret Garner "was neither Medea nor Lady Macbeth, but she was monumental like those figures, for her crime not only challenged 'the peculiar institution' but offended the black community as well" and that her act "shocked the black community by its violation of that community's own natural laws, even those of kin and tribe" (186). Morrison shows that this cannot be true, for too many other women had committed similar crimes—they also had killed their own children. Medea shocked the community, but it was Jason's community—not her own, and her reasons were so different from Garner's—primarily to punish Jason for abandoning her for another woman—not to protect them from the horrors of slavery, as in Garner and Sethe's case. So, Sethe may be linked to her literary
foremother by the act of murdering a child, but her real heritage is with Margaret Garner and the other women of her community who committed similar acts.

Sethe's heritage is important to the decisions she makes as a mother. Her maternal feelings are intensified by her memories of her own mother that she calls Ma'am like she called all of the older women. Never having known her mother and instead being raised by Nan, the nursemaid who took care of all of the children, strongly influences Sethe's need to protect her own children. Sethe can only remember the time when her mother showed her the brand under her breast (61) so that Sethe could identify her if she were killed. Rigney claims that these marks, like the scars on Sethe's back or the birthmark on Sula's cheek, "represent membership rather than separation" (39). Carol Boyce Davies in her "Mother Right/Write Revisited" discusses the marks of pregnancy including the swollen stomach and feet but also the practice of self-mutilation as a way of identification. Davies describes the Abiku tradition in which children are marked so that they may be recognized after they die and are re-born (47-48). The scar on Beloved's neck signals Denver and Sethe so that they are able to recognize her. These marks are a way of revealing a common suffering and history. Nan also tells Sethe about all of the children that Ma'am had "thrown away" and about how Sethe was the only one she kept because she was the daughter of a black man that her mother had "put her arms around" (Morrison, Beloved 62). But Sethe still suffers from the rejection of her mother, wondering what Ma'am was doing when she was caught and hung—fearing that her mother was trying to escape—leaving her behind. Sethe, who cannot imagine a mother abandoning her child, becomes a more devoted but consuming parent because of her own mother's story.
Another important part of Sethe's ancestry is the story of Baby Suggs. Morrison's depiction of Baby Suggs is very similar to the position Pilate has as a spiritual guide in the community. Baby Suggs, who stands firm during her years of slavery, is unfortunately unable to know most of her children, but she values her grandchildren and daughter-in-law as her own. Perhaps Baby Suggs reveals the saddest story in Beloved, the story of broken families and lost children—the pain of so many women slaves. Halle's sacrifice after she had spent sixty years in slavery is an act of beauty and selflessness. The story is historically accurate and similar to that told in Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. But Baby Suggs also watched as each of her eight children was taken from her. She did not have Sethe's luxury of knowing and loving her children, Halle being the only one she ever knew. In spite of her hard life spent in slavery, Baby Suggs is a wise, free, and optimistic spirit. She inherits the peace-loving spiritualism of Pilate from Song of Solomon and Ondine from Tar Baby, and she carries the charisma of Eva from Sula. She is a healer, a teacher, a priest, a Christ figure, a miraculous mother to all who are in need. Although she is dead before the novel even begins, the presence of Baby Suggs fills the pages of Beloved. Her advice for Sethe and others embodies her strength and presence even after her death. Just as Milkman gathered strength from Pilate, Sethe hungers for Baby's touch and calming words, "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield" (Morrison Beloved 86). Baby Suggs is also well-respected and loved by the rest of the community that shared in her spiritual gatherings in "the Clearing." They seemed to all rejoice in her words. "Let your mothers hear you laugh," (87) she would say. This powerful character gathers
force from all of Morrison's influences. She carries with her the traditions of the black pulpit in her spirituality and charismatic voice. Her life as a slave is based on many historical accounts of women in similar circumstances. Her literary ancestors are strong predecessors and guides for Morrison, Baby Suggs, and all of her followers. Just as Pilate knew how to fly, Baby Suggs "danced in sunlight" (86). Serving as a mother to Sethe, Baby Suggs encourages and guides her, but finally breaks down soon after Sethe commits murder. She loses faith in the world because she knows her community failed her, failed to give the crucial warning that might have saved Sethe from tragedy. After a life of giving and nurturing, Baby Suggs retreats to her bed to look for colors. With her sickness and death, Sethe is cut off from her heritage and community—isolated with her one remaining daughter and her guilt.

One of the things that Baby Suggs questions is Sethe's complete obsession with one child and her lack of concern for the others. Sethe's relationship with her sons is not nearly as clear as that with her daughters. For a mother to be so protective and concerned for her children but then to allow them to wander off without searching for them seems slightly contradictory. Howard and Buglar, scared of their mother as well as of the baby's ghost, holding hands and staying together at all times, are afraid that Sethe will one day kill them also. The boys experience a very real fear of the mother. However, Sethe expects them to one day return since "her daughter could come back home from the timeless place—certainly her sons could, and would, come back from wherever they had gone to" (182). Although it is her worry over the boys that makes her decide to leave Sweet Home, her concerns seem to change after she kills Beloved. Her thoughts dwell on Baby Suggs, Denver, and the ghost of her child.
Sethe's pain is the pain of every slave mother who watched her children suffer. She cannot bear to see her children in the chains of slavery. While Eva sacrifices a leg in *Sula*, Sethe gives her body to the carver of Beloved's head stone. But also like Eva, Sethe takes control and destroys her own child. This resorting to violence is described by Louise Gossett in her study on *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* in which she argues that social and economic dislocations along with unhealthy working conditions are the substance of violence (19). Each mother is trying to save her child from slavery—one that is self-imposed; the other is white-man made. Both try to destroy their children before anyone or thing can taint them with any kind of evil, even evil of self. Both women, however, are "playing God." But unlike Eva, Sethe suffers the consequences as an outcast of the community. After her imprisonment, she loses her sons, Baby Suggs, and her community in the process of "saving" her child. While many of her friends understand the horrible crime, they do not understand her pride and distance when she is released from jail. Even Paul D feels that "Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (164). To him, she does not understand her place in life, the difference between her daughter's life and her own. When Beloved appears, Sethe willingly opens her arms and her heart. She wants to be understood and forgiven for her horrible crime. She worries that Beloved cannot possibly comprehend her gruesome murder and that she might leave without ever understanding.

... Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could
never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. (251)

Sethe cannot separate herself from her children. The patriarchal construction of slavery in her life “dirties” her so much that she has no sense of her own self-worth without her children. She would have sat with Halle, her face covered with butter, if she had not valued her children above herself. After suffering at the hands of Beloved, Sethe is finally forgiven. Ironically, however, it is her own daughter, Denver, and the community of women who must come to her rescue.

Sethe’s story begins with the strength and sacrifice of her love for her children as she risks her life and struggles to escape the humiliation of Sweet Home. She endures the pain of beatings and the stealing of her milk by focusing on the needs of her children. Getting that breast milk to the child she sent ahead is her motivation at first. “‘All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl,’” (16) and then staying alive to preserve the life of her unborn child is all that keeps her moving. Even after the murder she says with strength and pride, “‘I wouldn’t draw breath without my children’” (203). She represents the ultimate strength and devotion of motherhood, not at all ashamed of her action and set in believing that her children and she were one. Sethe is still certain that killing her child was the right thing to do because she is convinced of the horrible life the child would have had to lead. Sethe cannot trust the world with her “best thing.”

Sethe’s community actually proves that she was right. Although Sethe was thinking of the horrors of slavery when she took her child’s life, as it turns out, even her own black community fails her. Stamp Paid describes the “mean” actions of the community.
Nobody warned them, and he'd always believed it wasn't the exhaustion from a long day's gorging that dulled them, but some other thing—like, well, like meanness—that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already to the house on Bluestone Road... (157)

Sethe knows that she cannot trust the white world, but does not learn until later that her own community abandoned her too. Even after the murder is committed, however, the community does not come to Sethe's side. No woman could have blamed her for the murder. Each woman understands the pain and suffering of slavery all too well and knows why Sethe chose murder. Ella makes this clear when talking to Paul D about the murder and Beloved's revenge. "Nobody got that coming" (256) she says when Paul D suggests that Beloved has a right to revenge. The women do not condemn her for the murder. They condemned her for her pride.

Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all. (152)

Sethe seems so strong and full of self-righteousness that the women cannot support her as they would normally have done after the murder. The scene is not only a part of a real history in Margaret Garner but is very similar to Hawthorne's Hester. She too, with a baby in her arms, is condemned for her pride or at least her lack of shame. So, not only does the community fail to warn Sethe of School Teacher's return, it also fails to come to her aid after the fatal act.
After Beloved returns, Sethe slowly loses her power and will as the guilt of her crime slowly envelopes her and she tries to give back to Beloved what had been taken away. Beloved eventually takes complete control of Sethe, draining every ounce of power and spirit with Sethe becoming a servant to her spirit daughter's every whim, and as the household falls into disrepair, Sethe becomes weaker from a lack of food and will. By the end of the novel, this once strong woman is bed-ridden and lifeless as she has given up all responsibility and power of mothering. She has passed from a strong, independent woman back through adolescence to a helpless infant-like state at the end.

In the end, however, when Denver puts away her mother's pride and asks for help, the community returns to the house on Bluestone Road led by Ella because,

Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy. (256)

As Ella leads the group of thirty women to Sethe's house, they all remember the fun they had at the feast given by Baby Suggs, no longer feeling the envy that had overtaken them. But Ella also remembers her own child that she had allowed to die because it was fathered by a white man. She knows that Sethe's crime is no worse than hers. The women join in shouting and singing to chase away the ghost of Beloved. Their words become a saving grace to Sethe.

Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The townspeople do not respond to her grief, "but her arrogance" (Taylor-
Guthrie 252). Sethe's arrogance and pride cause the community to reject her, but Denver is able to break the community's "curse" by asking for help, acknowledging their power and importance, showing her need for the women's choir. As Davies explains, Denver goes to the community allowing them to help, which "dismantles exclusive motherhood" (Daly 54). The arms and voices of these black women give Sethe the strength she needs to fight against Beloved. Sethe is comforted and empowered by her community. In the end, Sethe may finally recognize her own emerging selfhood when Paul D reminds her, "'You your best thing, Sethe. You are'" (273). According to Hirsch, Sethe sees herself as mother and subject in this final scene which "allows her to recognize both her love for Beloved and her love for herself" ("Maternal" 429).

In an interview with Marsha Darling, Morrison explains that Beloved is about "the tension between being yourself, one's own Beloved, and being a mother... One of the nicest things women do is nurture other people, but it can be done in such a way that we surrender anything like a self" (254). Through Sethe's story, Morrison brings together a historical perspective with Black cultural traditions of church, family, superstitions, and community. According to Judith Wilt in Abortion, Choice, and Contemporary Fiction: The Armageddon of the Maternal Instinct,

Morrison's Sethe made the ink that wrote the words that erased the humanity of her race and gender: she bore (made/suffered) the death that logically followed. She also carried the milk that, stolen, always replenished itself, and cried the tears a hungry world craved equally with her milk, tears of rage, grief, power... (165)

Her crime is representative of the horrors of all her ancestors. Her sin is certainly more brutal than Sula Peace's or Pauline Breedlove's or Ruth Dead's,
but it is somehow understood, and even forgiven, perhaps because so many other women committed similar crimes.

While Sethe is a literary descendant of all of Morrison's mothers, she is also the historical ancestor to these powerful women. Among those thirty women who come to save Sethe from Beloved's clutches might be Pilate, Eva, Ondine, Mrs. MacTeer, Ruth, and all Black women. Morrison brings her own maternal feelings to this offspring of Black history, folklore, and traditions. According to Carol Boyce Davies, "Beloved . . . simultaneously critiques exclusive mother-love and asserts the necessity for black women to claim something as theirs" (45). Beloved's mothers are both brutal and loving, free and chained, living and dead. They are among the sixty million and more, but they are also among the pages of Toni Morrison's fiction. The roots of Beloved are as deep and wide as the roots of the tree scarred upon Sethe's back.

In these six novels, Morrison explores so many varied facets of motherhood—some beautiful, some evil, but each of these characters shares the common maternal bond that provides a beautiful, terrible strength. Perhaps Pilate explains this best when she threatens to stab a man who is beating her daughter Reba. She says to him, "You see, darlin', that there is the only child I got. . . . Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. . . . Mamas get hurt and nervous when somebody don't like they children" (Morrison Song 94). This literary tradition of strong, possessive women is crucial to Beloved's powerful character developments. Without faith in their world, these mothers cannot entrust their child, their "best thing" to those who will not value and love him. Morrison mothers cannot successfully mother without a community of women—past and present—to nurture them and help them nurture, guiding them toward understanding of their boundaries.
Morrison's mothers are powerful and powerless, nurturing and murdering, peaceful and violent. They express themselves by loving their children and burning their children, loving their children and killing their children. They bear children and they remain childless. They crawl on their pregnant bellies to freedom and they sit in the street in agony. They are women of contrasts, ironies, and paradoxes. They cannot be understood, and yet they must be understood. What they have most in common, however, is their need for other women. These mothers need the strength of the women's choir as much as their sisters do. They need its harmonies to assure and reassure, to comfort and advise, praise and protect the raising of their children. Morrison shows through characters such as Pauline and Sethe that mothering is not a solitary act and that a single child has many mothers, both living and dead.
Chapter Five
Among Daughters:
Daughter-centricity and the Acceptance of Mother Ancestry

"Kill your ancestors, you kill all. There's no future, there's no past, there's just an intolerable present. And it is intolerable under the circumstances, it's not even life" (Koenen 73). These are the words of Toni Morrison in an interview with Anne Koenen in which Morrison is referring to the character of Jadine in Tar Baby who rejects her aunt's story and therefore her own heritage, becoming a woman with no culture. The daughters of Toni Morrison's mothers cannot live happily without learning the mother's story. They cannot understand themselves without first understanding their heritage and culture and making it a part of their own story to give back to the community. The daughter must listen to her mother's rich voice in the strength of the women's choir and then she must learn to sing her own song, her own voice strengthening the choir.

Morrison's daughters are part of the cultural cycle in that they must first listen to the mother's story, perhaps even reject it, but then become a part of it so that it can be given back to the mother, to her own daughters, to the rest of the community. Daughters who reject the story do not find happiness in Morrison's fictions and, in fact, remain lost souls, isolated from the rest of society and unable to sing in the choir.

Mary Helen Washington calls this pattern of the daughter learning the mother's story "generational continuity." She shows a "connection between the black woman writer's sense of herself as part of a link in generations of women, and her decision to write" (Hirsch, Mother/Daughter Plot 416). Washington sees "generational continuity, in which one's mother serves as the female precursor who passes on the authority of authorship to her daughter and
provides a model for the black woman’s literary presence in this society” (416). In Morrison, this “authority of authorship” functions beyond the “literary presence” described by Washington, since Morrison’s generational continuity is the primary means through which women pass on their heritage from mother to daughter—generation to generation. Washington and other writers such as Alice Walker and Paule Marshall show that the daughter’s voice and the mother’s voice are not only equally important in African-American fiction, but also that they are dependent upon one another. Marianne Hirsch claims that these writers, including Toni Morrison, “think back through their mothers” but write as daughters (Mother/Daughter Plot 416) and that “maternal discourse suffers from important and symptomatic limitations and constraints” because daughters have been telling the stories (417). In reality, Morrison’s mothers and daughters are part of the same story and are dependent on one another to pass on their heritage, the two voices becoming one. In Beloved, Sethe is both daughter and mother and Morrison writes from both viewpoints simultaneously just as Pilate is both daughter and mother in Song of Solomon. Sethe as daughter affects Sethe as mother—her feelings of loss and abandonment from her own mother determining her treatment of her own children.

As feminists are beginning to see the need for hearing both voices—mother and daughter—they also reveal the tendency to blame the mother for any problems the daughter has in society. Both Nancy Friday in her book My Mother/My Self and Judith Arcana in Our Mother’s Daughters tend to blame the problems that daughters have on their mothers. Friday claims that mothers viciously control and hurt their daughters, that they, in fact, cause their daughters’ unhappiness. Arcana agrees but believes that this maternal behavior is a product of the mother’s entrapment within patriarchy rather than
her own evil (Chodorow Feminism 80-81). Chodorow argues against this need to either blame or idealize the mother, believing that daughters cannot deny their mothers, since that would mean denying themselves and other women (93). She sees the need to “build theories that recognize collaboration and compromise as well as conflict” (96). Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy in Narrating Mothers explain that the problem of being committed to a feminism like that of Payant, Friday, and others means an absence of the mother’s voice, creating what they call “daughter-centricity” (2). In their view, feminists who want to hear mother voices have to “recognize the actual limitations both of mothers’ power and of their powerlessness” (7). The daughter story is fused so carefully with the mother’s story that their effects on one another must be examined together. Morrison does not intend to tell the daughter’s story by creating monsters out of mothers, nor does she make them into mammies or angels. Whether Morrison’s daughters find their way through the help of their mothers or in spite of their mothers, both mothers and daughters are responsible for the daughters’ success or failure.

For the daughter’s voice to be heard, she must become a part of the mother’s story. According to Adrienne Rich who recognized this need as early as 1976,

To accept and integrate and strengthen both the mother and daughter in ourselves is no easy matter, because patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize, these images, and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, onto the “other” woman. But any radical vision of sisterhood demands that we reintegrate them. (Of Woman Born 253)

In Rich’s analysis, both the mother’s and daughter’s voices have been weakened by patriarchal pressures which have caused women to fight and blame one another for problems in society. When the voices of women are not
allowed to sing together and are, in fact, encouraged to sing out against one
another, all women suffer. Reintegrating those voices is a difficult and important
act, illustrated by the complexities of Toni Morrison's fictions.

In Morrison's stories, daughters either learn from the mother and return
the knowledge, or reject the mother story completely and become lost to their
culture. Morrison's daughters go through stages on their way to learning the
mother's story. They must first listen to the story and hear about their ancestry.
Then, the daughters must go through a period in which they reject the mother to
gain individuality, but that rejection is just a phase. Eventually, the daughter
must return to the mother's story with her own story intact. These are normal
stages of development in Morrison's fictions. The daughter must become a part
of her mother's story eventually by listening carefully, adapting it to her own
individuality and then returning it to the mother and the women's community.
So, Morrison works to emphasize not only the strength of community from all
women's voices, but also the full circle through which daughters must go in
order to become successful members of the women's community.

One of the most complex facets of Morrison's daughters is their ability or
inability to become a part of the women's community. Why do some daughters
reach success and others fail so miserably? While some daughters are unable
to learn the mother's story and to find a place in their women's heritage, others
become completely integrated with their rich women's community. Morrison
daughters are unsuccessful—unable to learn the mother story—either because
the mother herself is unable to teach the story or because the daughters want to
adopt another heritage, refusing to accept the mother story. Morrison daughters
sometimes suffer from the mother's inability to tell her story or her inability to tell
the right story—to pass on her heritage. Sometimes the mother has adopted the
wrong heritage, as in the case of Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, or sometimes the mother dies before she is able to pass on her story, as in the case of Rose Dear, Violet's mother in *Jazz*. In both cases, the daughter is left in a difficult position—trying to learn the mother's story on her own or having to develop her own story through the help of other mothers. Some Morrison daughters who demand their independence simply refuse to accept the mother's story. Jade will not listen to Ondine's story any more than Sula will listen to Eva's—both girls preferring their own lives without the influence or even the knowledge of the mother's story. Similarly, Helene rejects her mother Rochelle Sabat because she has been taught that the Creole prostitute is an evil influence. Nel, in turn, rejects Helene, carrying on her mother's tradition. Understanding each of these ways that a Morrison daughter can fail to become a part of her community will also help to illustrate ways that she can succeed.

In the study of Morrison's daughters, examining each daughter's ability to internalize the mother's story as well as her ability to adapt it and make it part of her own story follows the same pattern as illustrated in the discussion of mothers and sisters. Self-understanding comes through this internalization of the mother's story, but accepting the mother is as important as accepting the self. Becoming a part of the community requires not only accepting and adapting the mother's heritage, but also returning this knowledge to the mother and other members of the community. Daughters must take the story full circle in order to become successful in understanding their role in life.

A daughter's sense of self involves her own search for independence and her own voice in Morrison's fiction. Usually, this search begins at an early age. Claudia and Frieda of *The Bluest Eye* search together for some identity apart from their mother, but they are perhaps too young to desire any division
between themselves. The two are inseparable in that they appear together in every scene of the novel and have few distinguishing characteristics. Sula and Nel of *Sula* strike out for independence much more forcefully. Sula's announcement to her grandmother, "I want to make myself" (92) and Nel's "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me," (28) are certainly proclamations of independence. These adolescents are on the verge of self-discovery, but other Morrison daughters are not quite so determined or confident in the self.

The story of *The Bluest Eye's* Pecola is the story of a daughter with no chance to succeed, no chance to become part of her community. Pecola cannot learn from Pauline because Pauline has adopted the wrong story. Her daughter wants to become blue-eyed and blond because that is the culture Pauline has accepted. White patriarchal forces that set beauty standards for society are ultimately to blame for the inability of Pauline and, in turn, her daughter to believe in themselves or their beauty. Pauline, rejected by her own community, and living out her life at the movies, does not pass on the story Pecola needs to hear. Instead of the warmth and comfort that she should receive from her black community, Pecola experiences only the cold whiteness of her mother's chosen heritage. Because Pauline is a mother who is trapped in the confines of patriarchy, so is her daughter. Paula Bennett, in "The Mother's Part: Incest and Maternal Deprivation in Woolf and Morrison," argues that mothers who remain a part of the patriarchy limit their daughters' abilities to set appropriate boundaries, which may lead to incest (Bennett 15). Bennett explains how patriarchy does not allow the mother to pass on strength—only helplessness (126). According to Bennett, who points to studies by Orbach and Eichenbaum, a patriarchal mother can't nurture or protect herself, so she can't very well
nurture or protect her daughter, which makes it "impossible for the daughter to break out of the cycle of failed nurturance" (126). This pattern of failed nurturance occurs in many Morrison mother/daughter relationships but particularly in the case of Pauline and Pecola. Pecola, the daughter of an escape artist, is trapped by her mother's failure to protect herself from their patriarchal society and finds it impossible to get free.

Pecola is not given the skills, information, or even the love to live securely and happily. Without rebellion, Pauline lives the life defined by white society, the perfect example of a mother intent on following the rules of patriarchy. Pauline is also the perfect patriarchal servant since she cares very little for her own family and is completely devoted to the white home. This perfect patriarchal model, however, leaves her own daughter lost. According to Susie Orbach and Luise Eichenbaum, a young girl's relationship with her mother is of utmost importance for it serves as the "foundation for the future" (Orbach 47). Orbach and Eichenbaum claim that "girls grow up learning that to know what others want, caring for them and being attached to them is right and must be the way to organize their lives" and that girls "must create a selfhood dependent on this kind of connecting to others" (46). Pecola does not learn this "connecting" as she should since no one "connects" with her. Pauline also has no friends, so Pecola does not have the benefit of community or even the knowledge of its importance. She does not know how to be someone's friend. In fact, all that Pecola knows is that she is lacking something—something important. She believes that her lack is blue eyes, not love. According to Susan Koppelman, the "absence of loving nurturance reduces the chance for survival; its presence enhances the likelihood" (Koppelman 284). Morrison illustrates this point through the contrast of Pecola's life and that of the MacTeer...
girls. Pecola receives no “loving nurturance” from her mother or anyone else and never learns how to give or receive love, while Claudia and Frieda are well-experienced in love.

Gloria Joseph explains how black daughters learn the limits of their mothers’ power early because of racism. Because of this, black women produce fewer “victim/powerless daughter narratives—ones that posit the mother as all-powerful and therefore as all-responsible” than white writers (Daly 7). Morrison’s story does reflect the tale of a “powerless daughter,” but the mother is “powerless” too. Pecola does not have a successful model to follow. Because of racism, black women are held in what Dorothy Gilliam in “Reaching Across the Feminist Racial Divide” calls “double jeopardy—being black and female, still counted as two by the affirmative action folks and pitted against our own brothers by those who enjoy seeing the friction” (Gilliam 263). Deborah King refers to black women’s oppressions as “multiple jeopardy” and sees the connection between oppression of all people (King 294). Pecola’s oppression comes from all facets of society. She is oppressed by the teachers who reject her and seat her in isolation. She is oppressed by her mother who chooses to love a white child more than her own. She is oppressed by her schoolmates who tease her and degrade her. The list goes on as Pecola’s “multiple jeopardy” becomes a bit unbearable.

Pecola is rejected by her mother for the love and concern of her white employer’s child. The child in her “pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips” (86) embodies the spirit of a Shirley Temple look-alike and further reinforces Pecola’s lack of self-esteem. When Pecola accidentally bumps the blueberry cobbler onto the clean white floor of Mrs. Breedlove’s employer’s kitchen, and Mrs. Breedlove knocks Pecola
to the floor, cursing her, and then comforting the little white girl, Pecola has suffered the worst fate a child can suffer—a mother's rejection. But to be rejected for a Shirley Temple only confirms Pecola's beliefs—she would be loved if she had blue eyes. While Pecola, legs still burning from the hot cobbler juice, is told to "get on out," Mrs. Breedlove kneels to hug the white child. Pecola cannot love herself when her own mother seems ashamed of her very existence and prefers a white child to her own. Pecola's desire for blue eyes symbolizes her acceptance of her mother's story, but the story is not one that she can live with herself, much less pass on for future generations. The daughter's desire to accept the mother's voice coupled with her father's rape—both of which are patriarchal forces—drive her to insanity and garbage heaps, unable to even hear the choir.

Another Morrison daughter who struggles to find self-worth because of her mother's lost voice is Violet of Jazz. Violet is in a situation similar to Pecola's, for Violet also feels that she was rejected by her mother, although Violet's mother rejected her through suicide. Violet knows that she too could choose insanity since that was her mother's method of escape, and Violet seriously contemplates that possibility. She wonders what was the final straw that sent Rose Dear to drown herself in the well. Like Sethe in Beloved, who envies Halle for going insane, smearing the butter on his face, Violet wishes that she could also choose insanity. Her times of sitting in the middle of the street for no reason, and sleeping with a doll, and stealing a baby, and slicing the face of a dead girl—all of these are her struggles between sanity and insanity. Violet does not know her mother's story, and her grandmother, like Pauline, talks of nothing but the white child that she helped to raise. Violet is left without a story, which is perhaps why she feels so lost.
Unlike Pecola, however, Violet does not end up insane—although she may commit some insane acts. Violet has a community and although they at times “left Violet to figure out on her own what the matter was and how to fix it,” (Jazz 4) she does find women who will listen to her needs. According to the narrator, the “children of suicides are hard to please” (4). Violet’s community of listeners including Alice and Felice, the family and friends of Dorcas, comfort her and give her strength—give her the companionship she needs to keep her sanity. So, although Violet suffers from the loss of her mother’s story, she is not lost herself because she has a community of other mothers to guide her toward finding herself.

Other Morrison daughters make a more forceful and conscious choice to reject the mother. Of the Morrison daughters who refuse the mother’s story, Jade, Helene, and Sula are the most blatant, all desiring another heritage than that offered by their mothers. Helene’s daughter, Nel, also rejects her mother, wanting to choose her own path, but eventually accepts the role of her mother. Although rejection is a positive stage of development between mother and daughter, most of these daughters do not make an attempt to go on to the next stage which includes acceptance again. These daughters want to lead their own lives without any connection with their heritage, wanting nothing more than to sing alone. Although they may realize that they are unhappy and feel somewhat lost, many of these daughters do not realize their need for the community or their heritage.

Jadine is, in many ways, as lost as Pecola—unsure of her place in a white world. She possesses the beauty that allows her to be accepted into the black or white world, but she doesn’t understand her purpose. She feels that her mother abandoned her at an important time in her life, crying, “You left me you
died you didn’t care enough about me to stay alive” (Tar Baby 261). She also feels confused about her position—not white but unable to fit into a black world either. According to Marilyn Mobley, “Indeed, the text reveals the dilemma Morrison faced in trying to depict the potential consequences of success predicated upon disconnection from one’s racial identity and cultural heritage” (Mobley, Folk Roots 136). Barbara Christian indicates that Morrison uses Jadine to show that class concerns may be becoming more important than race, “that women, in their search for autonomy, may be taking on patriarchal values. Jadine is a feminist in appearance without any of the concern for social justice that the concept should embody” (Christian 79). Morrison agrees that Jadine is a product of the feminist movement and shows how Jadine is tormented by the conflicts in what she has learned about women and what Ondine tells her (Jones 184). This is Morrison’s warning through Jadine—autonomy cannot replace community.

Morrison uses Jadine to illustrate her beliefs about the loss the American black civilization suffers from rejecting the old ways. “You can’t get rid of the pie lady and the churches unless you have something to replace them with,” says Morrison in an interview with Charles Ruas (Taylor-Guthrie 105). Jade never realizes that she needs Ondine and the strength of community because she is determined to find her own way. She, like Sula, refuses to hear Ondine’s story, refuses to hear how much Ondine has done for her. She rejects the mother story, and in so doing, rejects her culture. Morrison believes that there is danger in producing Jadines, especially when femininity becomes sexuality and there is no nurturing (105). Because of her rejection of the mother, Jade is haunted by her “nightmares,” her visions of women that scare her wherever she goes, all stimulated by the real vision of the woman in yellow who spat at her. The
woman's obvious disdain for Jadine, the cover girl beautiful model, send Jade running home to Ondine. Jade knows where to run but does not know what to ask when she gets there. In the forest, when Jade sinks in the muck, she is still afraid.

The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant—mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties... they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were. (183)

She is running away from her culture, her heritage as fast as she can. Her visions of black bare-breasted women in the dark in Eloë are also reminders of the culture she is rejecting, but Jade reacts in fear and runs away once again. Even at the end of the book, Jade is still running away. The only hope for her is that at least she knows that she is afraid of something and perhaps that fear will one day lead her to the knowledge that she is escaping.

In an interview, Morrison claims that Jadine "needs a little bit of Ondine to be a complete woman" (Ruas 104). Jadine is supposed to be the tarbaby. "Tarbaby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together" (LeClair 122). Jadine fails to do this, since she cannot even hold her own life together. She has lost her tar or never found it to begin with. Morrison is adamant about the need for nurturing across many generations for the village to survive. "If the race is to survive, it has to take care of its own," she says in an interview with Judith Wilson (Wilson 131). Marilyn Mobley writes of the choices Jadine has made.

Jadine distances herself from all the women in the novel—mythic and real. Thus when she leaves for Paris at the end of the novel, she is escaping more than Son. She is escaping her cultural heritage, her sense of 'femaleness,' her sense of self. . . . From the
woman in yellow, to the women in the trees, to the night women at Eloe, all the women in the novel question some aspect of Jadine's womanhood.

(Folk Roots 163)

Of course, Ondine is not Jadine’s mother and has never pretended to be so. She has always enjoyed spoiling Jadine and protecting her “without the stress of a mother-daughter relationship” (Tar Baby 96). Because she is Jadine’s aunt and because of her unique relationship with her employers, Ondine raises Jadine to believe strongly in her potential and she speaks of her with absolute pride, “She crowned me, that girl did. No matter what went wrong or how tired I was, she was my crown” (193). The expense of Jadine’s education and clothes and the rich circles which she travels in separate her from Ondine and her family. Ondine finally objects to Jadine’s actions:

Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women.

(281)

Ondine’s regret is not having told Jadine all of these things, believing that the fancy schools were enough. But Jadine rejects Ondine’s message, claiming, “You are asking me to parent you. . . . I can’t do that now” (281). Jadine refuses to be the caretaker, the nurturer. Ondine’s answer reveals the focus of Morrison’s novel, the connection between family and culture.

I am not asking you that. I’m just saying what a daughter is. A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her. No, I don’t want you to be what you call a parent. . . . I don’t want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours.

(281)

But Jadine does not understand Ondine or does not want to understand, saying “I don’t want to be like you” (282). Her rejection of Ondine’s story is quite abrupt.
and honest. She completely rejects anything that Ondine has been, and with that rejection she distances herself from her own heritage and culture.

But Jadine cannot isolate herself and be successful. Rubenstein labels both Jade and Sula "cultural orphans" (Rubenstein 133). Both women are refusing to hear the mother's story from someone who is not their mother. Because of Jadine's beauty and fame, she has become an outcast of sorts. She, too, is sisterless. Although Jadine may never roam the garbage heaps, she may still suffer the effects of a judgmental world. These women without a culture struggle in isolation and insecurity regardless of their beauty or finances. Pecola's fears turn out to be much like Jadine's—how to get someone to love you. Neither young woman has the strength and feelings of self-worth that they should have gained through their own community—confidence they should have gained from the mother's story.

Sula also rejects the mother's story, but much more forcefully than Jade. Opinionated and controlling even as a young girl of twelve, experiencing no problems with self-confidence or self-worth, Sula is considered beautiful and unique. After returning to Medallion following her years away in the city, however, Sula rebels against her grandmother, Eva. Her first action is to take the house for herself and put Eva in a rest home—something that was simply not done by any self-respecting member of the Medallion black community. "Don't talk to me about how much you gave me, Big Mamma, and how much I owe you or none of that," Sula shouts at Eva. She also objects to Eva's suggestion that she needs to find a man. "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you," Eva asks to which Sula replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Eva's answer is, "Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man," which is an odd thing
for Eva to say, since she has spent most of her life without a man. Sula's reply, "You did... Mamma did," is met with the phrase, "Not by choice... It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself" (92). Even though Sula is rejecting all that her grandmother tells her, she is also following her grandmother and mother's examples. Sula chooses a life without children because she cannot comprehend the need for that kind of relationship in her life, but she also believes that she would only bring harm to someone if she had to be trapped in a traditional mother's role. "Sula knew that one clear young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat's curve" (Sula 105). Perhaps Sula fears becoming her grandmother. She wants to "make herself," but she believes she is following a pattern set by her mother's story—the choice of independence. Eva wants her to know that she cannot choose to live all alone, but Sula's final words to her grandmother are threatening words of rejection.

I ain't never going to need you. And you know what? Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon flicking flies and swallowing spit, maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and—who knows—you may make the brightest flame of them all. (94)

Sula has set out to create her own story, but she mimics the actions of her grandmother and mother. Like Eva, she plays God, murdering a child, watching her mother burn to death and threatening to kill her own grandmother. Like her mother, she sleeps with the husbands of other women, but she only sleeps with them once and discards them, which the wives take as an insult. Because Sula will not listen to the mother's story—"I ain't never going to need you"—she loses the community that she needs for strength.

Barbara Christian in Black Feminist Criticism claims that Sula operates as a pariah in her community because she does not fit the stereotypical categories required of a woman. Her claim, "I don't want to make somebody
else. I want to make myself” (Sula 92) disturbs some black feminists. Barbara Hill Rigney calls the statement “almost demonic” because, “To ‘make’ one’s self, or at least to make of one’s self a single entity, is impossible, for all selves are multiple, divided, fragmented, and a part of a greater whole” (Rigney 39). Of course, Sula was merely answering to Eva’s insistence that she needed to find a man and have babies to settle her down. Why shouldn’t Sula have the right to choose not to have children? Eva goes on to say, “Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (Sula 92). Sula, of all people, knows the importance of connecting with another person as she did with Nel and later with Ajax, but she is called “demonic” when she chooses a path often picked by men. Sula is more similar to male heroes because she, according to Christian, “seeks her own individuality as a means to self-fulfillment. But as a woman, her desire to make herself rather than others goes against the most basic principle of the community’s struggle to survive” (Christian 54). She does not fit the normal categories of “mother,” “loose woman,” or “lady-wife,” which puts her in the category of witch, according to Christian. Although Sula’s mother and grandmother are unique and colorful figures, as Christian claims they do fit the stereotypes required of the community.

Hirsch is critical of Sula because she says that the characters reject the mother’s voice so that they may proclaim the sister’s. Hirsch sees this novel as an attack on the mother’s culture and heritage. She explains that women who reject the mother’s story have nowhere to go (Mother/Daughter Plot 426). Cynthia Davis blames what she calls Sula’s “splitting of the self,” which results in a “centerless hero,” on Sula’s rejection of the mother (Rigney 47). Morrison discusses the relationship between Sula and her mother and grandmother in a
1990 interview with Anne Koenen. Morrison sees Sula's actions in the novel as not being as "socially wicked" as her grandmother's, since Eva is the one who commits murder. But both Eva and Hannah do wicked things out of compassion for human beings. Sula's actions, especially putting her grandmother in a nursing home, according to Morrison, "cut herself off from responsibility to anyone other than herself" (Koenen 68). Because Sula alienates herself from her community, Morrison says, "In the Black community she is lost" (68).

In the same novel, Helene Wright also rejects her mother's story but for very different reasons. Patrick Bjork claims that Helene Wright represents an entire community of people who survive through "separation and introjection" (Bjork 61). Helene is rebelling against her own mother, the creole prostitute, while trying to become the perfect wife and mother according to white patriarchal definitions. Helene's grandmother, in trying to steer her away from the mother's lifestyle, watches Helene carefully and counsels her to be "on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood" (17). In Helene's case, she has been taught to abandon the ways of her mother, which she takes to an extreme in raising her own daughter. Adrienne Rich in Of Woman Born describes a mother's passing self-hatred on to her daughters through foot binding and other measures (243). Helene Wright may be the best Morrison example of a foot binder, but her motive is to make her daughter more attractive to the other race, not necessarily the other sex. All of Helene's actions as a mother are directly tied to her rejection of her own mother's wildness. On the journey to New Orleans, Nel cannot even speak with her grandmother because she has not been taught the mother language. Nel is not allowed to show any wildness, any excitement, which is why she is drawn to Sula. Helene refuses to accept her mother's story, choosing instead her grandmother's, so she still has her
community ties, but she loses all creativity and spirit. Elliot Butler-Evans complains that there are too many holes in Helene's narrative, that there is only enough information to condemn her for being weak in the face of the white conductor (82-83). In contrast to her, Eva and Hannah allow themselves all the freedoms that Helene tries to stifle. While Helene tries to fit all of the white, patriarchal standards with a very orderly house and a daughter who has been warned against showing too much spirit, Eva and Hannah entertain many men at all times of the night and day and have a constant flow of people in and out of the large rambling house. Helene's rejection of her mother causes her to become an extremist—taming anything with spirit or energy. This complete rejection of the mother leads her away from her culture, her inner spirit and toward patriarchal constraints.

For her daughter Nel, the daughter's rebellion is not quite so drastic. Because her mother, Helene, makes a whole-hearted attempt to calm "any enthusiasms" the young girl has, she drives "her daughter's imagination underground" (Sula 18). Like Pecola, Frieda, and Claudia, Nel is forced to believe that her "blackness" cannot be beautiful, and she experiences the pains of black adolescence through her mother's efforts to make her daughter less "black." Forced by her mother to wear a clothespin on her nose so that it will appear less flattened and to hot curl her hair so that it will appear less curled, Nel is coerced into accepting society's beauty standards. But Nel rejects her mother's schemes, not wanting to be her mother especially after seeing her turn to "custard" in front of the white conductor. "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me," (28) she says with conviction, and each time Nel says the word "me" she feels a gathering of power. A distant echo of Pecola, Nel's prayers, "I want... I want to be... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful"
(29) reveal her need to be different from her mother and also different from what she has been. While Pecola prayed to disappear, Nel prays to be unique and “wonderful.” So, regardless of the harms caused by a manipulating mother who calms her daughter’s emotions, Nel does find the strength to rebel, even if only in the quietness of her own bedroom, while Pecola can only sink beneath the covers. It is this spirit that leads to Nel’s friendship with Sula. “The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (29). Nel’s “me-ness” then becomes a part of the friendship she shares with the unique individualism of Sula. According to Marianne Hirsch, Nel “cannot sustain this self-definition alone, but needs a friend to complete her, a friend who can offer reflection and support but who will be free of the heavy suitcases and the orderly house, of the history that encumbers Helene Wright” (Hirsch, “Maternal Narratives” 420). So, Nel looks to Sula for what she cannot get from her mother.

Hirsch argues that although Sula “is clearly not written from the perspective of the mother, its generational structure allows it to serve as an emblem for the relation of an emerging feminism (new generation of women) to the maternal (oral tradition of the past)” (“Maternal Narratives” 418). But Morrison is doing more than Hirsch allows. She does spend time developing the thoughts and feelings of Eva, a very strong mother figure, and Hannah and Helene. Although more of the story is about Sula, that fits with Morrison’s agenda, which is to tell a story about women’s friendships. Hirsch argues that not only does Nel reject her mother, but Morrison manipulates her reader into rejecting Helene Wright with the description of her “custard” actions on the train and her refusal to learn her “mother’s tongue.” What Hirsch does not illustrate, however, is the connection between Nel and her mother. Nel rejects Helene
just as Helene rejects her own mother. By rejecting her mother Nel is following her mother's pattern. So isn't Nel, in fact, learning her mother's story?

Nel's prayer for "wonderfulness" and to be "different" illustrates some of the theories of Hirsch and Payant. Here Nel is rebelling against the wishes of her mother—a woman who can see no beauty in her own "blackness." Helene Wright wants nothing more than to raise her daughter to represent the perfect vision of beauty. She does not stop to see that she is taking away her daughter's inner spirit and beauty. Nel is raised to be another Maureen Peal, the perfect vision of beauty according to white standards. The difference, however, is that Maureen has a great deal of money but does not have a Sula. In this instance, Hirsch's theories about rejecting the mother to accept the sister are correct, but in this case, Nel had to first find herself in order to find her sister. Also, Helene does not stand in Nel's way once she meets Sula, illustrating Sula's power to win over both sister and mother with her spirit.

These daughters who do not learn the mother's story do not understand the community and heritage that should be so much a part of their lives. Morrison's novels show that these are not lessons that can be learned at a university, as Jade and Sula discover. Nor can a daughter invent her own heritage or accept the wrong heritage, as Pecola finds out. Some of these daughters remain lost without a culture, but a few find an other mother who guides them toward their ancestry, as in the case of Violet Trace who befriends Alice Manfred. Morrison shows that daughters who do not learn their ancestry remain isolated souls rather than a part of their rich community.

Even those Morrison daughters who accept the mother's story must go through stages to reach complete understanding. They must first simply listen to the mother and her community of friends, hearing the mother language. After
listening to the story, Morrison daughters then go through rejection in which the daughter tries to find her own independence and create her own story. When the daughter has gained some confidence in her own strength, she returns to the mother story, finally realizing the importance of blending both stories and passing them on. Morrison daughters who accept the mother's story must eventually return it to the mother to complete the cycle. Building community requires a circularity in which the mother's story and the daughter's must come together to create a rich heritage to be passed on to other generations. Claudia and Frieda are in the first phase—acceptance, which is a passive state. They listen to the mother's voice but do not yet act on it since they are still young. Reba and Hagar do not go through that period of rejection in which strengthening of self is the key, so they do not gain individuality or strength. Denver goes full circle and is Morrison's best example of a daughter who fully develops and becomes a part of her ancestry.

In *The Bluest Eye*, both Claudia and Frieda listen carefully to their mother's voice. They listen to her words mingled with those of the other women of the community and even though they do not understand, they seem to realize that it is important to listen.

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the throb of a heart made of jelly. (16)

These women's voices are part of the heritage that Frieda and Claudia are learning to cherish. They also listen when their mother talks to herself. Her singing through the family's problems and muttering for days about her disapproval keep the young girls attentive and out of the way.
If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. . . . Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. (24)

They respect her moods and her expressions of dissatisfaction. The two girls are beginning to develop some independence but still remain loyal to their mother's wishes, showing only glimmers of rebellion by burning the mustard greens. Morrison's first daughters know the importance of their mother's story and respect its power. Several scenes of the girls listening outside as their mother's voice can be heard inside are symbolic of the distance the girls are beginning to place between themselves and their mother. "We could hear the music of my mother's laughter" (28). But the intense listening reveals the value these young girls place on the sound of the mother's voice.

The MacTeer daughters try to pass on their mother's story to Pecola, accepting their roles of nurturers and caretakers as can be seen in the little-girl-gone-to-woman scene. Frieda and Claudia try to mother Pecola, giving her the knowledge she will need to live as a woman, but they simply do not know enough yet to pass on the knowledge. By the end of the scene Mrs. MacTeer, acting as an othermother, must come out to mother Pecola, taking her inside to clean herself, shutting the door and leaving Claudia and Frieda outside. The MacTeer daughters don't fully understand these mysteries of life themselves, but by their trying to mother Pecola, their devotion to the mother story is very clear and it appears that they will go on to develop and understand the story to become part of their mother's heritage.

Another important stage in a Morrison daughter's ability to accept her mother's heritage is the stage of rejection. If a daughter does not reject the
mother, then she cannot learn her own story—cannot experience the individuality that is important in her growth. Several Morrison daughters experience this difficulty, including First Corinthians and Lena of Song of Solomon, but these two do eventually find their own uniqueness and express some spirit of independence. In the same novel, however, the characters of Reba and Hagar remain attached to the mother. Because Pilate is very protective of them, the two women do not leave the comfort of her home and do not develop their own belief in self.

Barbara Hill Rigney in The Voices of Toni Morrison takes a look at the boundaries of the mother/daughter relationship by examining the works of Kristeva and Cixous. Kristeva views pregnancy and motherhood as a “redoubling up of the body, separation and coexistence of the self and of another” (Rigney 46). Cixous explains that “it is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another woman for her to be able to love herself and return in love the body that was ‘born’ to her” (46). Rigney illustrates the fusing of mother and daughter in Morrison, the shared lives, but claims that there are problems in daughters growing up without some establishment of individuality, citing the works of Chodorow in this analysis who refers to mothers who “maintained their daughters in a nonindividuated state through behavior which grew out of their own ego and body-ego boundary blurring and their perception of their daughters as one with, and interchangeable with, themselves” (Rigney 47). The issue here is separation of mother and daughter. How can the daughter develop a self if the mother and daughter remain one?

Although the warmth and sisterhood of Pilate’s home is clear, the difficulty of defining individuality and confidence in self remain apparent as
mother and daughter and granddaughter live as one. Although Reba is Pilate’s daughter and the mother of Hagar, she is the one most dependent on protection by her mother and daughter. Reba is attached to the simple pleasures of life such as winning contests and looking for men. Pilate and Hagar protect her simple ways and kind-hearted lifestyle. In one scene Pilate holds a knife to the heart of a man who is threatening Reba and explains to him, “I’d hate to pull this knife out and have you try some other time to act mean to my little girl. Cause one thing I know for sure: whatever she done, she’s been good to you” (94).

Reba is very easy going, always giving away prizes she wins and never eating much food. Her character and actions seem like those of an adolescent even though she is old enough to have her own adolescent. Reba never progresses beyond her adolescence, never leaves the protection of her mother, never has to develop the strength of her mother.

Hagar is much the same—a young girl who has been given anything she wants all of her life. Both her mother and grandmother react with surprise when they misunderstand her remarks about being hungry. From their genuine relief when they discover that she did not mean hungry for food, it is obvious that Pilate and Reba attend to Hagar’s every whim. She remains a spoiled adolescent all of her life. Although she is surrounded by love in a sisterly environment, she does not learn her own self-worth, her own definition. She has never rejected her mother or grandmother and so does not understand what life outside Pilate’s home could possibly be like.

Reba and Hagar remain protected in Pilate’s strength all of their lives, which keeps them from ever needing to develop their own strengths. Pilate, in a sense, has never allowed her daughter and granddaughter to leave the womb. “‘Every woman’s not as strong as she is,’” (95) are the remarks of Hagar about
her grandmother. Hagar and Reba have never needed to know how to protect themselves because Pilate has always done that for them. Pilate wants to keep her children safe, because she does not trust that the world will take care of them. "‘First real misery I ever had in my life was when I found out somebody . . . didn’t like my little girl’" (94). But Pilate’s protective womb does not allow her children to grow, so that on Hagar’s journey outside the womb, she cannot survive.

Hagar never knows what it is like to experience rejection, so she cannot understand how to act or how to be when Milkman breaks up with her. She stalks him insanely and uses an assortment of weapons for her many attacks. Hagar’s attempts to murder Milkman cannot be stopped, and her insanity only deepens over a period of time. Hagar is lost outside her grandmother’s protective world, outside the chorus of women’s voices at Pilate’s house. Her insane actions lead to a frenzied attempt to make herself beautiful so that Milkman will love her, which results in complete destruction. Her mother and grandmother do not know how to help. “Like the trees, they offered her all they had: love murmurs and a protective shade” (319). Hagar, however, cannot find anything of herself worth loving because she has never developed a sense of herself. Her failure to find her own individuality, failure to love herself, leads to her eventual death and the funeral in which Pilate questions in her sing-song fashion, “Who’s been botherin my sweet sugar lumpkin? Who’s been botherin my baby?” (322). Hagar is still seen as a baby, in Pilate and Reba’s eyes, never having the chance to become a woman.

Because Reba and Hagar do not reject their mothers, they never develop confidence in themselves. While they accept and live the mother’s story, they have nothing to contribute to its existence and their heritage. Hagar and Reba...
illustrate the need for Morrison daughters to find their own strength and sense of purpose or they will not know how to live. The stage of rejection is a necessary step in the process of a daughter's growth.

Morrison daughters must go beyond accepting the mother's story through a period of rejection and then return to the mother to become a part of her heritage and community. The daughter's role must go full circle so that she may become a successful member of the community. The mother's knowledge is crucial to a daughter's development, but the daughter's knowledge is crucial to the mother's continued support in the community. In Beloved, Denver, a daughter that Morrison takes full circle, becomes a necessity to the mother's existence by the end of the novel. Woven into Denver's daughter story, however, is her own mother and sister's daughter stories, so to understand Morrison's daughters all three women as daughters must be analyzed.

In Beloved, Toni Morrison completely transforms traditional mother/daughter relationships by giving two daughters power over a once very strong mother. Some hints of the same triad of women used in Song of Solomon are used in this novel, but the balance of power changes over time in Beloved. This transformation takes place very slowly and subtly with Denver and Beloved becoming more and more maternal as Sethe drifts toward a helpless childlike state. Each woman changes dramatically throughout the novel with Morrison re-casting the daughter role by calling maternal instincts into question. Another complication is in the description of Beloved's knowledge which seems to involve things that Sethe's mother and other ancestors knew. As Charles Scruggs explains in Sweet Home: Invisible Cities in the Afro-American Novel, "One reason the past takes such a tangible form for Sethe is that Beloved is not only Sethe's guilt reincarnated as her daughter, but also Sethe herself, the
daughter who suffers from an undefined guilt concerning her mother" (203). Mother/daughter roles are reversed in more than one direction in this novel. Since all three women express themselves as daughters, Morrison's novel is not only the story of a sacrificing mother but also the story of how daughters react to that sacrifice.

Beloved is definitely the most complicated of the three characters, beginning her appearance at 124 as a full-grown woman with "new skin, lineless and smooth" (50) and the appetite and sleeping habits of a newborn baby. Beloved speaks in broken English, using few words to communicate her simple needs or to ask questions of Sethe. "Where your diamonds? . . . Tell me your diamonds," (58) she asks in the curiosity and fragmented speech of a child. She breathes with the croup, must even hold on to the furniture to walk, and craves sweets like a toddler. She hates to see Sethe leave each day for work and is anxious about her return. But if Beloved begins her stay as an infant, she soon progresses to adolescence in her seduction of Paul D. "I want you to touch me on the inside part," (116) she asks of him, not even knowing the language of her desires. Instead of a healthy, growing individual, Beloved becomes more and more obsessed, more dependent and demanding of her mother's attention. Beloved acts as an infant daughter demanding more and more nurturing from the mother. The two women begin to share everything and eventually even look like one another. Beloved makes more demands, knowing that Sethe's love grows stronger out of her guilt and need to be forgiven. By the end of the novel, Beloved has reached physical womanhood and even appears pregnant, the very picture of motherhood. Beloved, a mysterious spirit embodied in a woman's body, transforms the mother into a child. As a daughter, Beloved appears to be a demanding, all-consuming child who has
complete control over her mother by the end of the book. Mother and daughter actually seem to become one. In Beloved's words, "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own" (210). Even Denver has trouble distinguishing between the two women. Beloved claims, "I am Beloved and she is mine" (214) as ghost daughter takes complete possession of the mother.

Sethe's entire being is completely driven by her own daughterhood, her own feelings about her mother. "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn't stop you from getting here," (203) she says to Beloved. Sethe suffers from the loss of her mother and wishes that she might have had the chance to know her own mother. Because of her loss, she is more determined than ever to not let anything hurt her child.

You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one. (203)

Part of Sethe's feelings for Beloved seem mixed with the worry of rejection that she feels as a daughter. "I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she?" (203). Her fear that her mother was going to leave her is the controlling influence in her relationships with her children. Sethe is willing to sacrifice anything for this child, but as her love for Beloved becomes stronger, her love for her other children is shoved aside. She loses Howard and Buglar and seems perfectly willing to give up Denver also. Beloved seems to be her connection to her own mother which makes her more valuable.
Of these three daughters, Denver is the one who must do the most changing. Denver's relationship with her mother is very complex. She wants to hear the mother's story, asking for the details of the journey from Sweet Home. She wants to hear how she and her mother shared in the struggle to reach freedom as she, like an antelope, pounds inside Sethe, reminding her mother that she cannot die because Denver would die too. Denver saves Sethe's life as much as Amy does, and after all, Denver is the one to pull Amy out of the hill to take care of Sethe. Even while a baby, Denver inspires the feast when Stamp Paid struggles to find blackberries for her. Although this is a joyous occasion, Baby Suggs believes that it alienated the community that would normally have warned against approaching danger. These are the stories that Denver wants to hear told and retold—anxious to know her mother's story.

Denver is the daughter who must use her heritage to save the mother. Although she begins her adolescence as a spoiled child, she later becomes a mature caretaker. Since the community's rejection of Sethe includes Denver, she grows up without any friends because of her mother's history. Denver, in fact, reacts drastically when she hears the rest of the mother's story at age seven. She goes completely deaf just after a little boy asks, "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (104). Rather than having to hear the answer to the question, Denver withdraws from life. She cannot bear to hear or comprehend her mother's story. Denver is also isolated because of her fear. She knows what her mother did and lives in fear of the crime's being repeated. Adrienne Rich claims that daughters are often nullified by silence but also by infanticide since they are the primary victims (Of Woman Born 24). Rigney calls Denver's condition "fear of maternal aggression" (Rigney 17). She knows that her mother can kill, and

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
she worries for her own life. Denver suffers from this fear of her mother that psychologists call matrophobia. She desperately wants a companion and a playmate and it is Denver's loneliness and isolation that keep the baby's spirit alive and active.

Charles Scruggs calls Beloved's appearance psychological "because Sethe's love for her daughter had been 'too thick,' so too is her guilt, and she unconsciously wills her daughter's return" (189). When Beloved finally does appear, Denver is at first happy for the companionship. Although the three women begin to share a closeness and companionship, that soon becomes unbearable and unhealthy as each is jealous of the other. The triad of Song of Solomon is much different in this novel. Denver seems obsessed with Beloved-eager for any moment that they may share and even hoping that her father will come to take her and her sister away. Sethe and Beloved eventually push Denver away, who soon becomes jealous of her spirit sister's unhealthy grasp on her mother. Finally Denver realizes that she must be the one to break the circle. She must be strong so that she can save Sethe's life once again.

While Denver is searching for fulfillment of her own needs, she eventually realizes the necessity of taking care of her mother's needs. Denver's struggles with her overly-selfish ghost sister help her to realize her own place in the family, her place in her mother's heritage. She has a very real function. She saves her mother twice—once on the run North, pounding inside Sethe forcing her to continue her journey to save her child, and once at the end of the book when she brings out the women's community to rescue her mother. Denver not only becomes the heroine in this novel, but also the mother. She begins as a rather spoiled, lonely adolescent who cannot understand the actions of her mother. But she is devoted to Beloved from the start, as it is
Denver, not Sethe, who is first to recognize Beloved and it is she who nurses her back to health at the beginning. "Leave us alone, Ma'am. I'm taking care of her," (54) she tells her mother. From that point on, Denver takes on much of the responsibility concerning Beloved, already becoming a caretaker.

Although the three share a brief time of adolescent-like fun on the evening of the skating, Denver is eventually excluded from the fun as Sethe becomes more and more devoted to Beloved. As Sethe and Beloved grow closer and become like girlhood friends or sisters, Denver becomes more motherly. When the relationship between Sethe and Beloved turns sinister, Denver steps in. "The job she started out with, protecting Beloved from Sethe, changed to protecting her mother from Beloved" (243). By going out to find work and food to support the other two women, she is the first to make contact with the women's community that is so crucial to Sethe's rescue in the end. Because of her memory of Baby Suggs and the words she continues to hear her speak, "Go on out the yard. Go on," (244) Denver knows that she must take the responsibility, "... leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (243). Denver becomes the mother figure when she makes that step, but it is her knowledge and belief in the mother story that allows her to make that step.

The somebody that Denver turns to is Lady Jones, for she knows that she must ask for help if she expects to save her mother. Lady Jones, Ella and the other black women see Denver's plea for help as a break in the pride that 124 had borne for so long. The same women who had kept silent when they should have given a warning came back to Bluestone Road to save Sethe from Beloved. What finally brings the community's support is Denver, a daughter who listens to her mother's and grandmother's story, makes it part of her own,
and returns with her community to save her heritage and her mother's life.

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. The singing women recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her.

Barbara Rigney sees Denver as the bridge between alienation and community (Rigney 60). Denver is the one who brings the women's choir to save her mother and her voice joins with the other women. Morrison's novel, thus, takes mother/daughter roles and completely transforms the responsibilities and expectations associated with each. By the end, mother becomes daughter and daughter becomes mother. Each must save the other, for it seems apparent that Denver could not have found the strength and purpose to save her mother if her mother had not first saved her.

In the fiction of Toni Morrison, for a daughter to be a successful member of the community who can grow and nurture others and contribute to future generations, she must learn the mother's story and accept its importance, go through a period of rejection in which she finds her own self-worth, and then return to the mother to complete the circle. Only those daughters who respect the mother's story may find a place in the community. In Morrison's fiction, a daughter is a woman who respects those who have worked hard to give her an existence and who gives back to those women the same courtesy. A daughter must respect her ancestry and become a part of the cultural cycle and the harmony of the women's choir. A woman without her heritage is lost in
Morrison's black community and the first step toward becoming a community member is to become a daughter. Through this safe passage of the mother's heritage, daughters learn to become sisters, the first step toward community.

Just as Morrison's daughters must come full circle in returning the mother's story and heritage for future and past generations, so this study returns to the words of Virginia Woolf and Lorraine Hansberry. Hansberry incites young black people to, "Write about our people: tell their story. You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention. Don't pass it up. Use it" (592). Her words are the message of Morrison's fictions, that these thoughts and feelings, this story must be passed on. Woolf encourages women to have "the courage to write exactly what we think" and to try to see life from a different perspective (118). Woolf's A Room of One's Own and Hansberry's To Be Young, Gifted and Black were both written as words of encouragement—words of wisdom meant to inspire great thought and spirit. Their messages are similar to the sermons of the Clearing, where, according to Sethe, "With Baby Suggs' heart in charge, the people let go" (94). The sisters, daughters, and mothers of Toni Morrison's fiction provide the encouragement and guidance needed to continue in the role of sisterhood. They continue the passing on, like a choir weaving together a beautiful spiritual that is a shared life between and among women.
Bibliography


Davies, Carol Boyce. "Mother Right/Write Revisited: *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose* and the Construction of Motherhood in Black Women's Fiction." Daly and Reddy 44-57.


Gossett, Louise Y. *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction.* Durham, N.C.: Duke


Vita

Hazel Ruth R. Caillouet received her bachelor of science in English Education from Louisiana State University in May of 1982, her master of arts in English in 1990, and is a candidate for the doctor of philosophy in August 1997. She continues to teach senior English at West Feliciana High School in St. Francisville, Louisiana. She also teaches part time for Louisiana State University through the Department of English and the College of Education.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Hazel Ruth R. Caillouet

Major Field: English

Title of Dissertation: Among Women: Toni Morrison's Mothers, Sisters, and Daughters

Approved:

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Date of Examination:

July 2, 1997