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Language, Relationships, and Death in Early Novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Based on an analysis of Toni Morrison's early novels, her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and the Norton Lecture series she delivered at Harvard University in 2016, this study articulates patterns regarding the relationship between death and language in Toni Morrison's work. When Toni Morrison gave her speech accepting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, she said, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives." I argue that this message is the major argument of her novel *Sula*, where she proposes her ideas about the relationship between death and language but is faced with barriers in time period, race, and gender of her characters. I go on to argue that Morrison reattempts to convey the power of language over death in *Song of Solomon*, where she reinvents the story through the lens of a male character in contemporary times. In this version, she expresses her argument fully but some of the value is lost due to the gender of the protagonist and the abruptness of his death. Morrison completely succeeds in relating her message in *Beloved*. This investigation delivers an analysis of each novel, discussing various factors impacting Morrison's message. It goes on to consider the relationship of language and death in African American tradition and folklore, which undoubtedly influenced Morrison's writing and ideas.

Dedication

I wish to dedicate this thesis to the students of Brighton High School, even the ones who shuddered when I told them I was writing a paper this long. You are all an inspiration and I hope you realize the power of your language.

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I wish to acknowledge the great support I received from all of my family and friends throughout the process of writing this thesis. Particularly, Kira McGovern, thank you for providing a place and time for me to conduct research, as well as a sounding board for ideas in some very early and disorganized stages. Joseph Barbato, John Barbato, Courtney Sheehan, and Melissa Gorman, thank you for visiting me at Fuel Café and always cheering me on. Rebecca Marks, thank you for reading the early draft and providing feedback. Mom and Dad, thank you for holding me accountable for various deadlines throughout this degree and for always believing in me. I'd also like to thank the members of the ALM team at Harvard Extension, especially Dean Shinagel for his patience and guidance as I was writing.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Language, Relationships, and Death

“We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” ~Toni Morrison

Everything I have ever read or heard that was written by Toni Morrison contains this message. It is ruthless, it is direct, but it is kind, and it assumes the best about human beings and our capabilities. Yes, “We die.” As if to say: accept it, don’t try to avoid it, stop pretending that the knowledge of this impending future does not impact your every move, every minute of every day. Death is the extent of our lives; it is our physical capacity and the persisting theme of our thoughts and motivations. If it wasn’t for death, muscles wouldn’t cripple, knees wouldn’t creak, hair wouldn’t grey, backs wouldn’t hunch, brains wouldn’t mellow. Death, with its impact on our physicality, causes us to flail under pressure, strike when cornered, conceal to preserve, and even to give love without thought or analysis. Without pity, Morrison designates death as the meaning of life.

But her message is not one of solemnity or destitution. On the contrary, Morrison quickly breathes hope back into her claim, giving us a beautiful and plentiful option for spending our existence: “we do language. That may be the measure of our lives.” Here, we can sigh with relief because, just as quickly as she has fired the gun, shooting us down with the reality of hovering death, Morrison has given us hope, power, motivation, life in the form of language.

Initially, it is curious that she pairs death with the word “meaning” and “language” with the word “measure” in their relations to our lives. Intuitively, and possibly optimistically, the two would be reversed and death would be the measure of our lives, leaving language to give meaning to it. But Morrison does not give this to us. Death, instead, is the meaning of life; though it is not only the path, but also the value of our existence. Language, however, is the measure of it, implying that we can spur past death, depending on how we relate to people. In this way, death brings importance to life because it drives us but language can take us further than death because the bonds formed through language and the impact our words have on others lingers beyond death. Language is our measure, our limitation; and death is not the ultimate end.

Furthermore, depending on how we use language, death is not a fate to avoid because it is not the worst option we have. We will die, yes, but we can speak, we can move, we can communicate, and those acts take us to a place that is more powerful than fatality. Life is more than functioning because the true test of a life is measured by how we interact and communicate. What a beautiful and helpful message and coming from someone, such as Toni Morrison, who communicates facts, politics, philosophy, and truth, through literature, this is an appropriate message.

Death will inevitably claim our lives, but it is not the only way to wound a being. The body and mind may start to fade as death comes closer but, even without death, prejudice, scapegoating, ostracizing, and dehumanizing can prematurely end

a life. With or without death, souls still tire. In some cases, death is preferable to life.

In 1993, Toni Morrison received the Nobel Prize in Literature and the above quote comes from the lecture she delivered upon accepting the award. Here, she uses a parable about a blind, but incredibly wise old woman as a starting point to discuss death, gender, relationships, and the way they are considered in our society. In the parable, a group of young people from town comes to visit the old, wise woman. They try to puzzle her and make her look like a fool by asking if she can identify a bird in their hands as alive or dead. The woman does not respond for many moments until she finally replies, "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands." Morrison goes on to analyze the bird from this story as a metaphor for a number of possible concepts. Primarily, Morrison offers that the bird represents language, which can live or die, depending on the person presenting it. Language can flop, struggle, or thrive, depending on the speaker and his or her intentions. According to Morrison, it can also kill or oppress, again depending on the speaker. Morrison emphasizes the connection that language bears to our humanity when she says, "word-work is sublime...because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference - the way in which we are like no other life." When the old woman from the parable tells the young people that she does not know about the life of the bird but she knows that it is in their hands, she is speaking to the element of power that each person has when it comes to language. What we do with our words is our decision. Morrison argues that this

decision defines us. Language is a weapon or it is a gift or it, itself, can be murdered, but our language is our choice.

Our language choices construct our lives because they connect or separate us from others; language is the decisive factor in both our lives and our deaths. In Morrison's parable, whether or not the bird is alive is not as important as what the children are doing with the bird. Language, the things we say to other people, and how we say it, measures our lives and gives meaning to them, thus rendering death less significant and fear-inducing than often held in American culture. If we do as Morrison suggests and define ourselves not by our deaths, but by the interactions that we have with people during our life, death becomes less of an intimidating focus, and perhaps even a better option when language and ability for self-expression have been snuffed out. Danger occurs when language cannot achieve its purpose: to break through social and cultural barriers, link people, trigger empathy and sympathy for difference. When language has been bound and confined by something immovable like slavery, racism, and gender prejudice, death is better than living in a confined silence.

The ability for a spirit to transcend death, whether through language or any other means, sounds like a Christian ideal. And, though Morrison's works are filled with biblical allusions, critics have noted more traces of African religions and views on death in her work than Christianity. Therese E. Higgins writes in her book *Religiosity, Cosmology, and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison* that "Morrison was raised within a community of people who spoke of their past, who told stories about friends' and ancestors' lives and deeds. These

stories were intermingled with folklore and traditions which are deeply rooted in African culture”, (Higgins, ix). As Higgins points out, Morrison’s roots in African religion and cosmology are more prominent in her view of death than any religion practiced by her family here in America. As Higgins states, when searching for religious meaning in Morrison’s work, “a limited amount is learned by looking into the African American’s America; much more is learned by delving into the African American’s Africa” (xi). The spirituality and mysticism in Morrison’s work is not a Christian or even religious statement as much as it is about the power of storytelling that is inherent in Morrison’s past and derives from African culture. Reverence for language itself and its ability to cultivate relationships and thus defeat otherness is Morrison’s driving force.

In her early novels, especially *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison expresses this same relationship between death and language as we find in her Nobel speech: that death can bring meaning to life, while the degree to which we relate to others in language measures it. In each of these early novels there is a character that struggles to break through due to race, gender, atypical choices, to form closeness to another person, put an end to his or her feeling of otherness and join together with a kindred spirit, using language to bond instead of break. This ideal is what each character seeks, but not one that each ultimately achieves. For *Sula*, her argument with Nel as *Sula* is dying is not powerful enough to rebind the two girls. Not until the last glimpse that we catch of *Sula*’s consciousness on the very line between life and death do we see her peaceful and succinct intent to bond with her friend, to seek the closeness she lost.

In her essay, *'New World woman': Toni Morrison's Sula*, Maggie Galehouse argues, "In many ways, *Sula* goes as far as Morrison's *Beloved* in describing the extent to which one woman's rejection of every available social script generates tangible, even fatal, public tension" (340). Galehouse suggests that Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* carries the same themes as *Sula*, such as otherness and feminist struggle. While I agree with Galehouse, I believe that to generate a stronger understanding of Morrison's message that takes gender and race into account but also acknowledges the messages about death and language that Morrison conveys, it is necessary to incorporate Milkman from *Song of Solomon*.

Milkman struggles to understand death, as well as to form bonds with his family and peers just as much as *Sula* and Sethe do. He traverses his life in a state of otherness, finally attaining connection to his family at the very end of the novel and of his life by learning about his family history. It is not, until his death, however, that he finally bonds with another person. In this case, he is so bound with his friend Guitar that it is unclear which of the two young men dies from the gunshot, and it does not matter. Their beings have been so fused that their deaths are shared. But this is when the novel ends and Milkman, who finally understands that death is not the measure of life, but the meaning, and who also binds with another human through action, is not further developed. His story ends at the moment of his death, thus undermining the message that language can transcend life. Milkman is an extension of *Sula* in this way. He develops further along a path using language to connect but his masculinity affords him advantages that *Sula* does not possess, yet his story is cut before he can live with the bond he forms with Guitar.

Still, Milkman does not balance ideas about death and the ability to connect with others until the very last moments of his life. It is not until Morrison writes the character Sethe from *Beloved* that we see a character who struggles with death, gender conflicts, navigating relationships to reconnect with others during her life. We must understand these novels as a trilogy of characters to understand Morrison's message about humanity: it is through each character learning to navigate gender, relationships, and death in a deeper way than the previous character that they, one after the other, convey Morrison's argument that connections formed by language transcend death. Sethe owes it to her predecessors but, in her, Morrison finally creates a character that triumphs over the struggle and balances an understanding of death with an understanding of the power of language. Or, as the old woman from Morrison's parable reflects, "Finally', she says, 'I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together.'"

Chapter II

Sula

Sula bravely tackles issues of gender inequality, racism in job opportunities, consequences of socioeconomic status discrepancies, and struggles with forming identity in the face of a judgmental community. However, a sense of togetherness and true bonding is not something that Morrison accomplishes in *Sula*, her second novel, and the first of the trilogy I will focus on. Morrison discusses conflicts between death and communication in this novel but it may even be possible for the reader to miss them because they are swallowed up by a character that is difficult to empathize with and that shares text space arguably too generously with other characters. Sula is an unapologetic feminist character who does what is right for her, without regard for others around her. It is evident that Morrison intends this to be an admirable characteristic yet, Sula is difficult to like and respect upon a first read, detracting from the positive feminist message. Sula's actions and words toward her friend and family make the reader shut off against Sula. We see her die alone and we feel happy; hear her friend Nel miss an opportunity to chide her and feel disappointed. Sula, the character, as well as *Sula*, the novel as a whole, are, on the surface, prickly and difficult to get close to. It is not until a closer read, that we see that closeness is all either novel or character truly want.

As a black woman living in a time of Jim Crow and prevalent racism, it is easy to assume that Sula's "otherness" and struggle to live by her ideals about self and

connectedness derives from her gender and her race. While some critics, such as Maggie Galehouse, have argued that this is not the focus of the novel, I disagree. I assert that gender and race are some of the largest factors influencing Sula's ability to connect with others. It is true that race does not impact her interactions with her friends or family members. But it does constrain her and thus influence her actions and abilities. Galehouse argues: "the near-absence of whites in the novel forces a recognition of difference within race, Sula's blackness, as Morrison defines it, also transcends race altogether" (339). I claim that her blackness is essential to her struggle. Yes, Sula's blackness does seem to transcend her interactions with her community members. Once Morrison establishes The Bottom as a black community; blackness does not, at first glance, permeate conversation or interaction between the members and it does not seem to be the focus of the content of the message of the novel. Her community exists on an infertile, largely jobless terrain. The men in the community have low self-esteem because there are very few jobs and the jobs that are available are totally controlled by white men who have total control over construction projects, who is hired to work those construction projects and, by default, the local economy. Jude, Nel's husband, for example, is characterized as a man who is living as half a person. He is unable to find work and thus struggles with his sense of self. As a young man he works as a waiter at a hotel. His family considers him lucky to even have a job, but he is not satisfied with this as he fantasizes of working manual labor: "It was while he was full of such dreams, his body already feeling the rough work clothes, his hands already curved to the pick handle, that he spoke to Nel about getting married." These fantasies inspire him to

take a wife so he can feel even more like his definition of a man. However, Jude's dreams are quickly smashed as he is described, standing "in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, 'Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,' that he got the message." As a black man, there was no work available for Jude and this affects him deeply. In reaction to this reality, Jude plunges forward with his marriage to Nel: "So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply" (82). As a reaction to the situation he is put in by the predominant white society around him, Jude is unable to realize his manhood in a way that he deems fit. Instead of feeling confident and competent in his relationship with Nel, he turns to her as place to bury his head and feel coddled. He may feel like a man in relation to her, but he does not behave like one. It is, therefore, not surprising when he sleeps with Sula, a woman who challenges and awakens his manhood instead of comforting him and urging a sense of acceptance regarding his situation due to his race.

Furthermore, in case the reality of lack of opportunities provided for community members isn't enough, Morrison gives us Tar Baby, a white man ironically named, who lives in Eva's house. Tar Baby is an alcoholic with physical and social oddities. He lives in Eva's house essentially because he is looking for a place to die. Later in the novel, when he arrested for public drunkenness, he is

mistreated by the guards in the prison, left beaten, with soiled underwear in his jail cell. "Ajax and the other men asked the officer why Tar Baby couldn't have back his clothes. "It ain't right," they said, "to let a grown man lay around in his own shit" (132-133). The policeman, obviously in agreement with Eva, who had always maintained that Tar Baby was white, said that if the prisoner didn't like to live in shit, he should come down out of those hills, and live like a decent white man" (133). The way the police treat Tar Baby implies that, because he was white, he was never accepted in The Bottom. In Tar Baby, we see the only integration in this novel and it is that of a white, suicidal, alcoholic, whom even the police seem to expect better of. It is as if they're saying that he is white so he should not be there because he can do better than that. His character, as well as the dangling carrot of opportunity for work that is always just out of reach of the community, impacts Sula and the decisions she makes, the opportunities she has, and the attitudes that others possess that influence the way they treat her. Race may not bear weight in Sula's choice of words or actions, but race is a prominent presence that affects Sula and her community.

The same logic applies to gender. Galehouse argues that, "Since Sula Peace is conceived outside of the constraints ordinarily felt by women in her community (Sula, alone, is "dangerously female"), her status as woman is only a small part of how she perceives herself and, ultimately, how she is perceived by readers" (339). While I agree that her status as woman is only a small part of how Sula sees herself; she does not hesitate to seek an education, does not hold back on sexual relations, does not waver on decisions in the name of being female. Even as she lays

dying, Sula does not express any shame for her actions or the fact that she never married or had children and, in fact, attacks Nel for prioritizing that goal simply because that's what females are expected to do. Clearly, being female is not in the forefront of Sula's motivations. However, it does affect her. After the community discovers that Sula has slept with Nel's husband and blame Sula for driving him from town, more rumors begin and the men of The Bottom start to spread "the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men" (112). The idea that Sula would sleep with white men is so horrifying to the community that this unconfirmed rumor is the moment they turn away from her permanently. This example is the culmination of the ways in which race and gender come together with powerful influence Sula's life:

Imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections--Sula underneath some white man-- and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier. The fact that their own skin color was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did. (113)

This staggering description of the way that the black people of The Bottom viewed not only Sula but any black woman who would dare to step beyond expectation and exercise this kind of sexual freedom is very telling of the society that Sula lives in. Sula will never be accepted for any of her attitudes or actions and that becomes clear from this passage alone. The amount of self-loathing that is occurring in this community is fuel for their principals of judgment. Despite the fact that their own

skin “was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile,” indicates that these people are willing to hate in Sula the things that they hate in themselves. Furthermore, even though it is acceptable for black men to sleep with white women, the worst thing that could happen is for a black woman to sleep with a white man. It’s as though, with a man, sex can just happen; men are sexual creatures so they are apt to sleep with whomever they feel attracted to at the time. But women are not sexual. They are supposed to think and feel before they have sex. So the fact that a black woman may consciously go through with a sex act with a white man can not be played off as a mistake. It is an unspeakable, shameless wrong in the eyes of these people.

To take things a step further, although each community member is attributed his or her own private fantasy about what happens with Sula and these white men, Morrison indicates that each one imagines her “underneath some white man.” There is no coincidence here that, of all the possible positions, the people imagine Sula under the white man. White men, the ones who are suppressing, pushing down, crushing the life out of the black people in the community would obviously be on top, exercising the same power over this woman, Sula. Except instead of being a helpless victim, the way the people of The Bottom see themselves, Sula is choosing and participating in the sexual relationship. How must it be for the members of the community to see Sula as a representative of them, serving as a mirror for them, pointing out the ways in which they also participate? It is far easier for them to use Sula as a scapegoat than to face the ways in which they and their families before them have participated in that which they hate.

The judgment she receives, not only from those in her community but, more importantly, from readers, clouds the message about death, and relationships that she articulates more clearly than any other character that Morrison will write. The focus is removed from Sula's message because her sexual actions, the way she treated Eva, her grandmother, and the way she treated her friend take the forefront. A woman, not only a woman in *The Bottom*, but a woman anywhere is expected to prioritize relationships with family and friends and is expected to hold marriage as the most coveted and precious institution. A woman should not engage in sex without devotion or morality. So, when Sula does those things, she is automatically silenced. All of her powerful deathbed words are automatically tainted and muffled, even to a modern day reader. Imagine if Sula (similar to Jadine in *Tar Baby*) did not return to *The Bottom* and sleep with many men, including Nel's husband, but, instead, got an education and came back and served herself by opening shop or writing a book. These would be socially acceptable behaviors for women, though still empowering and demonstrative of independence. The truth is that society still picks and chooses the behaviors that are acceptable. Perhaps Morrison, when writing *Sula*, over-optimistically judged how much society's expectations for what women value had changed.

Sula was marked as different from birth, both by the family she was born into and her physical appearance, which alone indicates that Sula will be different from other citizens of the *The Bottom*, the small community where she grows up. A physical description of Sula indicates that, "Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid

toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. It gave her otherwise plain face a broken excitement and blue-blade threat” (52-53). In this passage, Morrison vividly describes Sula’s complexion, as well as the notable birthmark over her eye. In doing so, Morrison characterizes Sula’s personality at the same time as offering physical imagery. The birthmark not only indicates that Sula is different from others in her community, but it is described as giving her face “a broken excitement” and a “threat.” Both of these characteristics are realized in Sula’s actions in adulthood as her joy and excitement both break others and are broken by others around her. The threat pronounced by her birthmark also indicates her future as a threat to relationships, manhood, and femininity of those who come close to her, simply by existing in her own way.

Additionally, as Carolyn Jones argues in her book, *Sula and Beloved: Images of Cain in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, there are comparisons of Sula’s birthmark to markings found in the biblical character, Cain, who was beaten by hail and ordered to leave Eden as a punishment by God for killing his brother Abel. When Cain is ordered by God to leave Eden, he expresses no remorse for killing Abel, only fear that others will now hate him and want to avenge Abel’s death by killing him. The hail left a mark on Cain’s face that became black and set him apart from others in his community, leaving him recognizable and vulnerable. According to Jones, Cain, “concerned with self, lets sin in the door, but more importantly, he refuses to acknowledge his effect on the ‘other’ “ (615). Cain does not repent for his sin for killing Abel. On the contrary, he feels he was right in his action; Abel was a threat and a competition to him, so Cain eliminated him. For Cain, this was not a difficult

decision. What he does feel is fear for his own life and resentment that he has been marked as different and thus easy to identify as outsider and other.

The birthmark on Sula's face is an easy parallel to Cain, but the otherness that the mark implies for both Cain and Sula is the deeper connection. Sula, like Cain, will take action in her own best favor and not feel remorse. She will be ostracized from the community because of actions that they deem immoral. She will become a scapegoat upon which members of the community blame their own misfortunes. With just this small marking, Morrison prophesizes Sula's otherness, and her position as an outsider that both contributes to her struggle and also pronounces the esteem of her plight.

Sula's family is another way in which she is destined for "otherness" in the community from a young age. Her grandmother is Eva Peace, a woman who was abandoned by her husband when her children were very young and who left the community and her children for a year, only to return with one leg missing, and enough money to provide for her family. The mystery of what happened to Eva's leg and in what way that was related to the money she encountered is among the hottest of gossip topics circulating The Bottom. Furthermore, Eva's reputation as a seductress also permeates local opinion. Somehow, the fact that Eva is missing a leg makes her more attractive to the men she encounters. This ability to seduce is then passed on to her daughter, Hannah, also a single mother, and Sula's mother. Hannah is known throughout The Bottom as someone from whom to hide your husbands. Hannah lives with Eva in their family home and, as Sula notes as a young girl, often engages in her liaisons with men of the town in the pantry of the

house. The Peace women, though not always hated and rejected, were always viewed by others in the community as dangerous women who threatened the security of marriage and fidelity that other women in town thought should be a given to rely upon. With a family like this, women who indulge their powers of seduction, women who are not phased by traditional expectations for respecting marriage, and men who leave, Sula is set up to be a pariah in the community. What we couldn't predict is that she would harness that otherness and use it to her own advantage.

On the same day as her best friend Nel gets married, Sula decides to leave town. As Nel prepares to retreat into the house with her husband to consummate their marriage, Nel looks through the door to see, "a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road. One hand was pressed to the head to hold down the large hat against the warm June breeze. Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling" (Morrison 85). Up until this point, Sula has at least had one person in the community to whom she can relate and that is her best friend Nel. Nel's marriage is the last nail in the coffin of Sula's destiny to be an outsider in the community. However, instead of reacting sadly or with self-pity that her best friend is married and thus distracted, Sula reacts with confidence and excitement. When she walks away from the town, Nel notices the slight strut and has the impression that Sula is smiling. Sula fully becomes an "other" in this moment, but it does not bother her in the least. In fact, it empowers her to leave town to pursue an education and then to seize more agency, individuality, and otherness upon her return to the community. Sula's intimacy with

Nel ties her to the community, but when Nel binds to another person through marriage, Sula breaks from all other relationships and resolves to prioritize her own personal development.

When Sula returns to The Bottom after being gone for ten years, she exits the train and walks directly to her childhood home in Eva's house. When she sees Eva, she does not bother with pleasantries, nor does she show care for how Eva is doing. Eva expresses that she is offended that Sula would just burst back in without acknowledging her absence. During an argument between the two of them, Eva asks, "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you' (92)". Here, Eva expresses her desire to see Sula domesticated, not only because it is the traditional thing to do but because she believes that pairing with a man and having children would suppress Sula, tame what Eva sees as wildness. Eva, though non-traditional in many ways, sees the fact that Sula left the community with the sole motivation of bettering herself and then returns without considering the effects of her actions on anyone else as selfish and sinful. Her viewpoint echoes a common theme in Morrison's novels that characters who are ostracized from the community are destined for suffering and Eva tries to save her granddaughter from this fate. However, this sentiment will not work with Sula. Sula does not falter in her response, replying " 'I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself' (92). She asserts her singular desire to develop herself, not to create anyone else. To this, Eva responds that she is, " 'Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man'" (92). Even though, as Sula goes on to point out, Eva and Hannah both existed without a man, Eva does not think the same is best for

Sula. She thinks that Sula would be less selfish if she bound herself to a man. To Sula, being selfish is not a bad thing; it is the reason for living.

It is not a coincidence that, when Eva sees Sula for the first time, before any of this argument occurs, she is immediately reminded of her ex-husband who left and returned to find her raising two young children alone but did not appear to regret his decision to leave. Because of her past experience, Eva is predisposed to react in a confrontational manner to her granddaughter. She “looked at Sula pretty much the same way she had looked at BoyBoy that time when he returned after he'd left her without a dime or a prospect of one” (91). Because Sula has left town and returned unapologetic, she is compared to a man. This is behavior that is more typical of a man, as is caring more about oneself than others or disregarding the feelings of others in exchange for one's own motivations. Eva left town herself, but it was with the objective of obtaining money so that she could support her family. She then returned and functioned as the best mother she could be. Because her choices were about other people instead of herself, Eva's actions are acceptable according to society. But Sula's actions, like those of BoyBoy, were about Sula alone and, as a result, Eva frowns upon her, even though her own actions were only marginally different.

When Boyboy left and returned without reflecting on how he affected others, Eva considered him a villain, complete with victims; the women and children he shunned. However, when Sula, a woman, behaves in almost the exact same way as BoyBoy, the person she victimizes the most is herself. There is no husband or child who she has hurt. Because she is a woman, she does not have the power to

victimize, she remains her own victim. In the same argument, Eva claims that by leaving town, regardless of what she was doing, Sula has “thrown her life away.” To this, Sula responds, “It’s mine to throw.” Sula guards her life as the most precious thing. She does not want anyone else to have any say or power over it.

Ironically, Eva, the very person who chastises Sula, might have been the person from whom Sula inherited many of her convictions, including her independence. Eva’s early life is, in many ways, a foreshadowing of Sula’s. She, like Sula, leaves town in order to gain something. She has an encounter with death in which she demonstrates a belief that death is not the worst option and can actually bring you closer to a person. She is also single and considered sexual by men in the town. Eva is, in many ways, a prototype for Sula. However, the two are unable to view the similarities in a way that will allow them to bond. In fact, when Sula attempts to draw parallels between herself, Eva, and even Hannah, Eva shuts her down by replying that she and Hannah did not have a choice in the way their lives turned out. Instead of feeling insulted by this or bested, Sula’s response sounds like: Exactly. You didn’t choose this, but I did. Don’t you see the power in that? Eva does not see the power in choosing a single life and so instead of bonding over the amazing commonalities that they share, Eva uses gender and societal expectations to reprove Sula. And even though Sula does not pander, by contrast she fires back confidently point by point, the line is drawn between the two women. Eva locks her door to keep Sula out and Sula eventually has Eva committed to a nursing home. But this failure with her grandmother does not mean Sula doesn’t want to

connect with others or experience closeness with anyone. In fact, albeit unapologetically, Sula tries to point out commonalities in their lives.

Eva misses the opportunity to relate to her granddaughter over their actions and attitudes toward independence but, as a symptom of this, also neglects to realize their similar and complex views on death. Each character in Morrison's trilogy has a relative who serves as a predecessor for a relationship with death that is carried through to the focal character. In *Sula*, Eva is that character. When she was a young, single mother and her son Plum returned from the war stricken by heroin addiction and symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Eva provides a home, food, and the offer of emotional support for him, but cannot heal his ailments. Plum is too deep into his addiction and does nothing but sit in his room high, or steal from Eva and Hannah to get drug money. Eva chooses to take action about this in a way that is demonstrative of Morrison's message about death that permeates this novel and the other two to come: Eva kills her son Plum.

However, in true Morrison fashion, his death is presented as a pleasant and transcendent experience. For Plum, in the moment of his death, "there seemed to be some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell...He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said" (47). The "wet light" that Plum felt was kerosene being poured over him. And the "eagle" pouring the kerosene was Eva, his own mother, preparing to light him on fire. It is surprising that this is not a scene filled with fear or anxiety for Plum. Instead, he feels comfort and beauty. He

has a feeling that things will be all right. Death, for Plum, is a better option than the ruined life that he has been living. And Eva is the one to seize the power in death for her child and enact it upon him.

Morrison makes it clear that Eva does not kill her child because she doesn't love him anymore; by contrast she kills him because she does love him and she does not want to see him like this. She believes that death is not the worst outcome for her son. This is evidenced by the fact that she remembers him as a playful child right before she sets him on fire. She also looks around the room to observe the trash, the disorder, and blood-filled bottle that he is currently surrounded by (46). The juxtaposition of memory with the reality of the present demonstrate Eva's motive for killing her son; she does not believe that death will be worse than this. She remembers what he was like before he was afflicted and she understands that he will never be able to go back. She chooses to remember him in life when he was actually living it instead of as he is doing now, suffering and wasting away in a state that pales in comparison to what she considers to be true life. By killing Plum, Eva demonstrates the same values that Sula executes throughout her life; Eva believes that it is better to die than to live a tortured existence. In a way, living to the fullest extent of her ability is what Sula is fighting for when she leaves town. She is building her individuality, paving ways for herself to thrive beyond a subpar life and this is exactly what Eva believes she is doing when she kills Plum.

Sula's occupation with her own existence does not discount her desire to be close to other people, but it does encompass thoughts and feelings that go deeper than most of the people in her community. From a very early age, Sula develops a

relationship with death that is demonstrative of Morrison's message that "death is the meaning of life." Sula experiences the gravity of death in a very abnormal way and from a very young age. When she and Nel are playing by the river as children, a small boy called Chicken Little from the town comes to play with them. In good fun, Sula swings him around in a circle and releases him into the water. But Chicken Little never comes up. Instead, "[t]he water darken[s] and close[s] quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers [is] still in Sula's palms as she [stands] looking at the closed place in the water" (61). Sula accidentally kills Chicken Little with Nel watching. In this moment, death becomes the meaning of life. The reality that something can exist in one moment and dissolve so quickly that the life still leaves an impression, even after death, floods Sula. Both Sula and Nel stare at the water, not believing that Chicken Little is truly dead. Morrison portrays his death similarly to Plum's. It is not a painful or fighting experience. It is just another step; he is there one moment, laughing, and in the next moment he is not even a ripple in the water, he is only the impression that he has left in someone's hands. In this scene, we can almost hear the woman from Morrison's Nobel parable whispering, "it is in your hands." Chicken's death has left its impression on Sula's hands. Although he is dead, he continues to connect with her beyond the grave, not only with the literal feeling in her hands but with a lasting impression that death does not always feel horrible or wrong, even though it is tragic.

Even Nel admits later in life that watching Chicken die, she strangely liked it. She remembers "the good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped" (170).

And she wonders to herself, “ ‘why didn’t I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?’” (170). Both girls realize from Chicken’s accident that death can be dramatic at times but there are times when it can just slip in. And maybe there is part of the human condition that initially accepts death, even welcomes it without fighting against it.

Yet, although both girls spend the first moments of Chicken Little’s sinking just silently staring at the water, they are almost immediately filled with guilt because they believe they have been seen. Shadrack, the town loon who was never the same after going to war and is responsible for instituting a town tradition of National Suicide Day, appears at the water’s edge and possibly sees what happens with the girls and Chicken. A few minutes later, when Sula goes into Shadrack’s house to investigate if he saw what happened, the scene is surprisingly filled with peaceful imagery. She is afraid of Shadrack and of going into his house but she remembers “the peaceful river” behind her. When she does enter his house, she discovers that it is “neat” and “restful.” And when she sees Shadrack, she is no longer afraid. She sees him as graceful and he appears kind. Sula feels so calm in that instant that she actually forgets why she came for a moment and begins to leave without verbalizing to Shadrack the question she had wanted to know. As Sula leaves, there is a lot of imagery of liminality. She stands at his porch, in a doorway, on the cusp of leaving without doing so yet. We see that “At the edge of the porch, gathering the wisps of courage that were fast leaving her, she turned once more to look at him, to ask him... had he...? He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come” (62). The language of borderlines and edges signifies the fine line

between life and death that Sula has experienced. The peaceful imagery echoes her strange peace in the presence of death. Just before Sula leaves, Shadrack “nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in a pleasant conversational tone, a tone of cooled butter, ‘Always’ ” (62). In this most formative moment, Sula’s first experience with death, certainly her first experience having death on her hands, Sula receives the message “always,” a message of eternity. This moment is a perfect apex of death and language. Sula experiences death giving meaning to her life in nearly the same moment that she experiences language giving measure to it; and the measure is “always.”

With the experience with Shadrack and Chicken Little behind her, it is perhaps no surprise that, when Sula witnesses her mother, Hannah, burning alive, she looks upon her mother’s burning body, seemingly un-phased. While Eva tries so hard to save her daughter’s life that she thrusts herself out of a window and endangers her own life, Sula does nothing. When Eva is on the ground bleeding, having failed at squashing the flames that burned her daughter, “she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking.” Even though women in town try to reassure Eva that it is normal for a child to be paralyzed with fear during a moment of something so traumatic, Eva “remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (78). Sula appeared to Eva, not to be feeling for her mother in that moment, but to be observing the death, taking it in. The reader, knowing Sula’s previous experience with death, understands that Sula does not fear death or pity people experiencing death the way others do. For Sula, death has a peaceful component; a chance for

hope and independence; a glimmer of eternity. Sula associates death with a way to connect to life. And seeing Hannah dance as she burns to death, most likely reinforces this for Sula. Meanwhile, for Eva, having another child burn to death, this time without her own agency and without benefit to the child is a horrifying contrast to the death she has caused. Eva also knows what it is like to have death in her hands but has lived under the false impression that only deaths in one's control are peaceful. Sula and Eva's similar yet distant experiences with death are not communicated and thus the two women feel distinct and disconnected. Language is not used so the two do not bond over this death.

Sula feels alone on her views in death, views that are continued into her adulthood and become linked to her vision of sex. While most women in her community understand sex as a mechanism for reproduction or a love act to be given to a husband, Sula sees it as a self-serving act that is connected to death and loss. Sula comes to love sex, not because of anything having to do with the men she engages, but because of the sadness it allows her to access. For Sula, "there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power" (123). In a position where Sula felt weak and powerless, she could actually grasp the measure of her life. In facing what felt like a threat of death, she did not feel meaning for her life but the extent of it. In Sula's experience with sex, she finds that, "[t]here, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning" (123). In these little brushes with the extent of her human capacity,

Sula faces the limitations of her being and of all beings and confronts the loneliness and solitude that is life.

And Sula does not run from this intense reality. In fact, she seeks sexual experiences specifically to experience this deep sadness and loneliness. She does not fear the “leap[ing] from the edge” that she experiences in these moments. She welcomes this edge and the experience of it brings deeper meaning to her life. The image of this “edge” that Sula experiences while on the cusp of an orgasm during sex is reminiscent of her first experience with death, when she went into Shadrack’s house after Chicken Little has drowned. She stood at the edge of his porch, just after accepting the reality of death, just as she stands time and time again at the edge of her mortality every time she has sex. Shadrack spoke the word “always,” and Sula has continued to feel an eternal feeling at the same time as she perceives life’s limitations. For this reason, Sula is the first messenger for Morrison’s idea that accepting death and its limitations can actually bring more meaning to a life. It can allow for language to take on more power because there is less fear of the measure of life when you have already experienced the meaning of it.

In her strife to develop and preserve her sense of self, Sula also destroys her ability to connect with the only person to whom she truly wants to connect: her friend Nel. Nel, the person to whom Sula was closest as a child and the person with whom Sula shares Chicken Little’s death experience, should still be her closest ally. But because Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband, causing an argument between them, the two have become strangers and opponents in adulthood. Just because Sula expresses the message that death is the meaning of life does not mean she neglects

to embody the second half of Morrison's message: that language is the measure of it. In fact, Sula expresses this second component to her intention when she engages in her deathbed argument with her friend, Nel. During this argument, Sula's words never veer from her life's philosophy to put herself at the forefront. However, she still expresses desire to find commonality with Nel, it's just not the kind of commonality that Nel is able to see. For Sula, race and gender should not work against her. Instead, they should add up in her favor to allow her to express herself and be herself as freely as she desires. During the argument, Nel claims, " 'You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't'" (142). Nel, ever vigilant of societal expectations, believes that Sula cannot think for herself and do for herself as a black woman. Sula responds, " 'You repeating yourself [...] You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?' " (142). For Sula, she has all the power because she is a black woman. She thinks independently and act with selfish motivations and has all the freedom in the world because, as a black woman, especially in this community, she very well can. Her gender and race allow her to express herself in her relationships as deeply as she wishes. This is something Nel cannot understand or connect with.

Nel and Sula clearly disagree on the way black women in America live their lives. Sula says that every black woman in America is, " 'Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.'" When Nel argues that her children and

participation in the community have given her something to show for her life. Sula retorts, " 'Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me." 'my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely.'" Just like Sula's father and grandfather, Nel's husband Jude left the family. Consequently, Nel gets to say that she is a victim, alone because her husband cheated then abandoned the family. She is struggling against a current that has been brought upon her. But Sula does not want that and certainly does not see that as admirable. Sula has chosen her own path and constructs it so that it to be impervious to the kinds of influences that chase Nel. Sula does not see that being lonely because of someone else's choices is at all preferable to being lonely because of one's own choices.

Sula, in this moment, seems to channel Morrison's perspective as a woman writing in the 1980s, through the voice of a character existing in the 1930s. From Morrison's point of view, a woman should not feel obligated to build her life around the nuclear family structure. In fact, she argues that black women have been succeeding without circling their lives around men for generations. Morrison states in an interview with Billy Moyers: "we're managing households and other people's children and two jobs and listening to everybody, and at the same time, creating, singing, holding, bearing, transferring the culture, for generations" (Moyers and Company, "Toni Morrison on Love and Writing (Part I)"). According to Morrison, black women, though by obligation, were called to independent of men and marriage before white women. Black women were single mothers, cared for others'

children, worked, and served as the nucleus of their family units for generation before white women decided to do so by choice. Therefore, when Sula decides that she wants to live for herself and make decisions for herself in Morrison's fictional novel set in the 1930s, it is not far-fetched that a black woman would have this kind of thinking. Sula goes so far as to state that in being a black woman it should be self-evident for her to be independent. When she asks Nel, " 'You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?'" She is voicing Morrison's argument that Nel's insistence upon being domesticated and attached to a man is unrealistic. Sula is taking the reality of the single black woman and seizing control over it but making it her own choice. She has harnessed the power latent in the black woman's condition in forced independence.

However, Nel is not ready to see this side of the argument and so she shuns Sula. She still sees herself as relative to her husband, with the traditional sense of a family unit as the priority. As Maggie Nigro observes in her essay *In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's Sula*, Sula's insistence upon living solely for herself, not as an accident or a symptom of someone else's actions, but by her own prerogative, is too much for Nel or the other community members to accept. Nigro argues that "Sula was stubbornly unwilling to define herself as part of the Medallion community and to conform to its standards, and by deliberately placing herself outside of the accepted boundaries, she stood alone. In her quest to 'make herself,'" (12). Because Sula was alone on making this stand, left without being able to communicate her ideas to others, she was doomed. Sula could not attain the success of convincing Nel of her beliefs because, according to Nigro, "Sula was following a

path that had never been trod before, a path for which she had no tools and no directions" (12). Sula was doing something that no other woman had intentionally done before and this left her rendered unable to connect to the community. In Sula, Morrison created a character that perhaps was not truly unrealistic for the 1930s but that the community was not ready to open its mind to, leaving Sula a pariah, unable to connect.

Sula viewed all of her actions, from those related to her career to those related to sexual behavior to be parts of composing her identity and so she was unwilling to compromise, even when it came to sleeping with Nel's husband. Later in this same argument, Nel finally gets the courage to ask Sula why she had sex with Jude. She expresses shock and dismay when she discovers that Sula did not do it out of love, or even lust, she simply did it because it filled her own personal desire. Nel asks Sula, " 'But what about me? What about me? Why didn't you think about me? Didn't I count? I never hurt you. What did you take him for if you didn't love him and why didn't you think about me?' " And then, "I was good to you, Sula, why don't that matter?" To this, Sula responds, " 'It matters, Nel, but only to you. Not to anybody else. Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it'" (Morrison 144-145). Here, we see Sula's philosophy again expressed: It is not worth it to spend energy on other people; caring for other people, having expectations for other people, unless it is also self-serving. Nothing else is guaranteed except what you, as an individual, can control and that is yourself. It's not that Sula did not like Nel. It's not even as though she wouldn't have wanted to find their commonalities and connect to each other. But Sula refuses to

do this and sacrifice her commitment to herself at the same time. Reminiscent of her argument with Eva when she first returned to the Bottom, Sula engages in this battle of wits with Nel and, even though all the cards of traditional morality are stacked against her, Sula wins.

Evidence that Sula wants to connect comes when she responds to Nel, “I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?” (145). Here, Sula highlights the imperative detail that, while Sula partook in sexual relations with Jude, Jude was just as willing a participant. Nel was willing to forgive Jude, to keep him as a husband but he is the one who chose to leave her and their children. Sula is right to point out that it was not she who chose to forego the connection between them. Nel had a different standard for the man in her life than she did for the woman. Not only is Sula un-staggered by the fact that Jude left, as every other man she has ever known has done, but she sees his abandonment as exactly the point she is trying to make. The women should be on each other's side; sharing, forgiving, building each other up; because the men leave. Sula believes that the connection she has with Nel is so deep that sex with someone who is unreliable anyway would be a non-factor. She does not realize that Nel no longer shares these beliefs and now views adultery as a higher sin than severing the true connection, which is between Nel and Sula.

Sula values their friendship, too, but she values a different aspect of it. She believes friends should be supportive and accepting of each other's choices. She does not think that standards such as marriage and the behaviors that correspond to it that have been instilled by society should have as much impact on a

relationship as the love that should be underlying. She wishes to connect with Nel, but she doesn't realize she would have to sacrifice any part of herself to do so. She uses language to express to Nel that there may have been a way for the them to reconcile the friendship, but that Nel was too far gone into society's grasps to behave in a way that would have lead to a truce between the two women.

Further evidence that Sula not only wished to connect with Nel, but also believes there could have been a place for her in the community except that everyone is too backwards and confused to accept her is demonstrated when she states:

Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me." The sound of her voice was as soft and distant as the look in her eyes. "After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers' trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs... then there'll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like." (145-146)

In a strangely sensitive moment at the end of this statement, we see that Sula yearns for love. She sees that, as she exists, and the way the community currently exists, there is no way it will every happen in her lifetime. However, she has a desire for connection. In Sula's fantasy above, she imagines that all the people, like herself, living on the outskirts of society will mix in acts of love with all those who represent traditional society. "Guards" and "jailbirds", "grannies" and "whore", "mothers" and "faggots", "white men" and "black men" are all paradoxical pairings according to

traditional society. Sula does not want to stop with herself as the only outcast. She envisions a world in which everyone who feels ousted can connect, bond, and feel welcome. Sula, the one who traverses the outer edges of society, is the one who longs for connection and understanding most of all. But she refuses to imagine it under false pretenses that require individuals to change themselves to fit a mold, as Nel has done. In her world, all people can maintain their individuality but still accept each other.

The desire to connect is boldly evident in the last view that we get of Sula's consciousness. We see that, "She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (149). In her final moments, Sula desires to share her death moment with someone, the ultimate desire for connection. She wants to use language to share her experience and to bond with her closest friend, even despite their argument. But for Sula it is too late. Although Nel, too, ends up yearning for her connection with Sula later in life, the two women missed their chance to form a connection that could go beyond death. Because of the roles of gender and race in their society, they did not use their language to form a lasting relationship.

Chapter III

Song of Solomon

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison tries again to prove that bonds formed through language can supersede death. But this time she uses a male character, softens him, and sets him off on a very similar journey to Sula's. It is a statement in itself that Morrison felt compelled to use a male character after her female character was usurped by gender standards that silenced her message. It is as much a comment on society as it is on the characters themselves that Morrison changed the gender of the protagonist when she wrote her third novel. She seems to say: you didn't listen to me when I spoke through the voice of a strong woman; will you listen to me if I soften the story, provide more context, and present almost the exact same character, but make him a man?

In her foreword to *Song of Solomon*, Morrison discusses that her inspiration to write a novel around Milkman's character was almost divine. Her father had just passed away and it seemed to be his advice, his voice that came through in her writing. Morrison discusses that her father saw her as "interesting, capable, witty, smart, high-spirited," but that she did not view herself in this way. Morrison says that when her father passed away, she missed not only him as an individual, but also the way that he saw her. Writing Milkman was Morrison's answer to this loss in her life. When her father passed, she manifested that interesting, witty, and smart person in writing. And in a male character. In the same foreword Morrison writes,

“The challenge of *Song of Solomon* was to manage what was for me a radical shift in imagination from a female locus to a male one. To get out of the house, to dedomesticate the landscape that had so far been the site of my work. To travel. To fly” (xii).

Knowing that Morrison’s father had recently passed at the time she felt called to write this novel brings new meaning to words and themes that appear throughout the text, such as when Milkman says to Pilate: “ ‘your father’s body floated up out of the grave you all dug for him. That was your father you found. You’ve been carrying your father’s bones – all this time” (333). In many ways, that is exactly what Morrison is doing as she writes this novel: she carries her father’s bones with her and uses that skeleton, that structure, to revisit her ideas about gender, relationships, and death.

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison said that her writing developed with time; that she always had a strong voice in her writing, but that she had to learn with time how to seduce the reader, to bring the reader in with finesse, instead of using an abrupt approach. When analyzing *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, this development is evident. Morrison builds background for Milkman, introduces us to his family and their history in a deeper way than she does with *Sula*. Instead of only focusing on the anecdotes that convey her message, we get a larger picture of Milkman’s daily life and family history.

Within the first few pages of the novel, we begin on the day of Milkman’s birth with information about his family history interwoven throughout. Like *Sula*, Milkman was marked as unique from birth. Milkman is afflicted with one leg that is

longer than the other, thus causing him to limp. In addition to having a physical manifestation of otherness like Sula's, Milkman is also marked by the circumstances of his birth. As his pregnant mother walks down the street with his sisters, an investment banker walks to the edge of the building and jumps off, seemingly trying to fly. At this moment, when Milkman's mother "saw Mr. Smith emerge as promptly as he had promised from behind the cupola, his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest, she dropped her covered peck basket, spilling red velvet rose petals. The wind blew them about, up, down, and into small mounds of snow." At this moment, apparently due to the shock of the man's attempted flight, Milkman's mother goes into labor on the side of the road. But Morrison does not paint the moment as traumatic or fearful. Although chaotic, the moment appears beautiful. Milkman's mother falls to the ground, the investment banker dies, but Milkman's sisters simultaneously release their sewn flower petals, speckling the landscape with a contrast of red against the white snow.

Furthermore, in the same moment, we encounter Milkman's aunt Pilate. She happens to be on the street at this time and, when she witnesses the intense scene, she begins to sing a song. Later in the novel, we will find the significance of this song to Pilate but, in this moment, we see, "a woman suddenly burst into song. The singer, standing at the back of the crowd, was as poorly dressed as the doctor's daughter was well dressed." The contrast of Pilate's dress to that of Milkman's mother is as stark as the red rose petals upon the white snow. Milkman's birth, therefore, is peppered with as much conversion of contradictions as it with death. Reminiscent of Sula's deathbed fantasy about all the different kinds of people

one day finding a way to co-exist and calling back to the scene when Eva kills Plum and the flames envelope him in a calming, beautiful way that makes him feel that he is being comforted and reborn, this scene binds birth with death in such a way that foreshadows Milkman's journey through his life.

Marked by paradox, predestined to explore boundaries between life and death, Milkman begins his life in a small town. Although *Song of Solomon* is set in the 1960s, twenty years after the latest set chapter in *Sula*, the racism is still palpable. One vivid description of the way white people treated black people and deeply ingrained reactions that a black person might echo back with is embodied in a flashback that Milkman's best friend Guitar has. Guitar does not eat candy because it triggers a painful memory for him. His memory is very closely aligned to an experience Nel has in *Sula*, illustrating the parallels between the communities and individuals in both novels, despite the discrepancy in years. When Morrison describes Guitar's memory, we see that "he remembered anew how his mother smiled when the white man handed her the four ten-dollar bills. More than gratitude was showing in her eyes. More than that. Not love, but a willingness to love. Her husband was sliced in half and boxed backward.... Even so, his mother had smiled and shown that willingness to love the man who was responsible for dividing his father up through eternity." Here, Morrison repeats a similar scenario to that of Nel's mother on a train with a white conductor who disrespects her in front of Nel. Nel's mother smiles in just the way that Guitar's mother does here. The only difference is that, from this moment in Nel's life, she learns that there are some times when you not only must concede to those who disrespect you at the deepest

level, but when you must show submission in the form of love to them. This seems to be the mistake that Nel continues to repeat throughout her life in relationships with men, as well as her ideas about the black race in society: that not only should blacks respect their position below, but also that they should accept it with a warm smile. Meanwhile, Guitar, perhaps because of his gender, perhaps because he is Morrison's revision of the character, takes an opposite approach to the memory of his mother's loving smile when in the face of disrespect and racism. Guitar swears off all candy from that point on because that's what his mother bought with the money the white man gave her. He never forgets her smile and it causes him to compile internal rage against the racism that the candy and the smile represented.

Similarly to Sula, Milkman lives a life of "otherness" throughout his adolescence and young adulthood with a racist society as a backdrop. His family name "Dead" indicates that he and his relatives will be different from the community. Milkman's last name came from a mistake made when one of his relatives tried to register the family but the white man behind the counter misheard him and marked his name as Dead. For generations, including Milkman's, the family name becomes Macon Dead and saying it becomes, "my name is Macon and I'm already dead," which is originally used to induce fear during a confrontation, but later becomes a joke. This saying, though generated from a racist error, signifies that Milkman has roots in a family that does not fear death. It also foreshadows Milkman's destiny to walk the lines between life and death.

But long before he starts to explore the concepts of relationships and death that will be his destiny, Milkman is simply functioning as a dissatisfied member of

his community. He battles to find a place in his community and to function as his true definition of a man. One night when Milkman stands up to his father for mistreating his mother, he leaves the house and finds that everyone on the street was “crammed on one side of the street, going in the direction he was coming from. Nobody was going his way” (107). In this way, on the very night that he challenges power structures in his household, thus ostracizing himself from his family, he also recognizes that he does not have a place outside the house and within the community. He seems to be different from everyone else.

And when urged to be more sensitive, to care more for others by his friend Guitar, Milkman cannot comply. When Milkman has a dream that his mother is gardening but is then buried alive by the dirt in which she is working, he decides to share his dream with his friend Guitar. In response to this recantation, Guitar responds, ““Why didn’t you go help her?’ ... ‘Pull her out from underneath.”” (105). When Milkman replies in confusion that it was his dream, so he was only going to do what he wanted to do, Guitar pushes back with, ““It was your mother too”” (105). Their conversation interpreting the dream reflects each of the men’s philosophy about life as well. Guitar thinks that Milkman is selfish and greedy, always taking from those around him and observing them as if they are play-pieces in his life, not real people. Guitar, through this interpretation, implores Milkman to take more of an active role in the lives of those around him who are hurting. Meanwhile, Milkman cannot understand Guitar’s point of view. Milkman takes Guitar to be in the same category as his father: a man who lives in fear and desires to control Milkman’s behavior. Milkman does not exactly know where he

wants to fit in with his community, family, and world. He does know that Guitar trying to tell him how to feel and act with compassion is a way of trying to help him. Milkman does not want this kind of help because he believes that he will have to sacrifice his individuality in exchange for bonding.

The difference that he perceives between himself and others around him comes as much from his own thought processes as did Sula's. When Milkman later reflects on this conversation with Guitar, he thinks, "Maybe Guitar was right – partly. His life was pointless, aimless, and it was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for" (107). Milkman was too self-absorbed and didn't desire to sacrifice for anyone else. He proceeded through life, doing what was right for him in the moment. As he continues his life, Milkman begins to realize that behaving without regard for others is not the way to be. Trying to share his dreams with his friend Guitar, engaging in the verbal intercourse with him, indicates that Milkman yearned for a connection through language. Unfortunately, the discourse manifests as argumentative and the two men cannot come to an agreement on how to treat others. Comparably to Sula's deathbed experience with Nel, Milkman gets completely rejected, shut down, insulted by his friend every time he tries to connect, but the fact that he tries to form bonds with Guitar by advocating his point of view indicates what will eventually become his success.

Furthermore, his relatives emphasize Milkman's "otherness." Although his father is a prominent and successful realtor, his history and roots are largely unknown in the community. Macon Dead Senior is known as a snide businessman

who plays by “white rules” and is not afraid to eject or reject any tenant if they are not timely with payments, no matter their reason or status in the community. Meanwhile, Milkman’s mother’s heritage as the daughter of the only black doctor in town also contributes to setting his family apart from others. His family is just a little more successful than those around, and carry themselves with just a little higher sense of pride that is often resented by others in the community.

Then, when Milkman is an adolescent, he meets his aunt Pilate for the first time. He feels a connection to his aunt that he can’t immediately explain and he is different from anyone he has ever met. However, as readers of Morrison’s work know, she is not different from anyone we have ever met. Her character resembles Eva’s in many ways: she is bold, fearless, a fierce single mother, and, most significantly, has that embracing relationship with death that we saw in the Peace women of *Sula*. Pilate was also marked from birth as different as she was born with no navel. Throughout her life, people interpret this in different ways, but it usually leads them to believe that she is some sort of witch or mystical misfit. As a young girl, she travels to various communities, looking belonging but is rejected on account of not having a navel.

Pilate’s otherness does not stop at her navel. She also possesses some powers that are different from most. She has some healing abilities, above average strength, and power of mind that allow her to carve a life for herself and her family, despite being a family of all single women. It’s as though the rejection Pilate experienced from her lack of navel made her accustomed to rejection and allowed her to become tough so that when she finally does settle in a community, she is not plagued by

public opinion or societal standards of morality when she becomes a bootlegger, a job that allows her family to thrive, but also keeps them separate.

In his essay, *The politics of space: Southernness and manhood in the fictions of Toni Morrison*, Beavers points out that Macon says to Milkman, “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not in this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (Beavers 70). Macon’s advice to Milkman indicates his understanding of Pilate as a spiritual person. He does not give her credit for very much but he does credit her with the ability to teach lessons about life after death. For Macon, this is not a compliment. Macon believes that material possessions and a person’s relationship with things is the way to succeed. He advises Milkman to own things instead of spending time with Pilate and his other relatives building relationships. Pilate is an “other” in Macon’s eyes because she has chosen a lifestyle that is not based on possession but she has still achieved a level of success. He does not want to see his son follow Pilate’s example but Milkman has already been intrigued.

Additionally, Pilate connects with death in a way that is present in Morrison’s former female characters. Pilate is haunted by the death of her father who repeatedly appears to her and says, “ ‘Sing. Sing’ ” and “ ‘ You can’t just fly on off and leave a body’ ” (147). Pilate continues her life with a very open relationship with her dead father and believes that she understands everything that his ghost speaks about. When he says “sing,” she believes it is because she has a beautiful voice and

he encourages her to use it. When he says, "you can't just leave a body," it is because when she and Macon, her brother and Milkman's father, were young, Macon killed a man in a cave. Pilate interprets her father's message and takes it as a life lesson that when you are responsible for a death, you must carry a piece of that life with you at all times. She believes her father's ghost is encouraging her to return to the scene of the murder and collect the bones of the dead man so that she can carry the burden of his death with her throughout her life. Pilate does exactly this and hangs the bones of who she believes to be the dead man in her house.

Pilate's philosophy about the dead man draws a notable parallel between her story and one of the aspects of Sula's. Technically speaking, Macon killed the man in the cave. He hit him on the head with a rock in what he thought to be self-defense. Pilate did not do anything in that cave except watch. However, Pilate sees herself as much at fault for the murder as Macon. She reflects, "the fact that she had struck no blow was irrelevant. She was part of her brother's act, because, then, she and he were one" (147). Pilate's belief that it is possible to be fused with another person and thus responsible for that person's acts is nearly the exact same argument that Eva screams at Nel during her visit to the nursing home. People can be connected to the point where they share agency in each other's actions. Just because Pilate did not wield the rock did not make her innocent because she would have done the same thing and observing an act in silence makes a person culpable. Pilate accepts this without question in a way that Nel absolutely does not. It's as though, with this acceptance, Morrison is resolving a conflict that she could not resolve with Nel until the very end of *Sula*, thus pushing these character

further along in their emotional evolution. Nel, because of the way she was raised, because of her marriage, her children, her community, could not accept the fusion between herself and another person, even during the most tragic situations until the very end of the novel.

Furthermore, Pilate's relationship with the death of the man in the cave indicates her belief on death. She believes that death is not one singular incident. One person's death can follow another person. There are some deaths that refuse to be abandoned at the grave. A person can live on in the minds of the living. And, for many of the women in Morrison's work, language proves to be more powerful than death as the dead can continue to communicate with the living beyond the grave.

As Milkman gets older, we see that he shares this fluid relationship with death with his aunt. Similarly to Sula, who does not shy away from death when she observes her mother burning to death, Milkman does not seem to fear death, even when it is immediately threatening him. In fact, he sees death as a better option than his dissatisfaction with the life he is currently living. As he awaits Hagar, his scorned cousin who wants to either love him or murder him, when she has broken into the apartment where he is staying, Milkman thinks:

Now it was all going to end. In a little while she would walk in the door and this time he would let her do it. Afterward there would be no remembrance of who he was or where. Of Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians, of his father trying to stop him dead before he was born. Of the brilliant bitterness between his father and his mother, a bitterness as smooth and fixed as steel. And he wouldn't have those waking dreams or hear those awful words his mother had spoken to him. (126)

Milkman's thoughts become obsessed with the possible death that may be in his near future. He imagines how Hagar may kill him and fears the pain that would

come with the death process but does not fear the loss of his life. In fact, he sees death as a way that he can escape and evade the awkward intimacy of the relationships in his life. His sister Magdalene called Lena, who is hostile toward her brother, will later chastise Milkman for using his masculine sexuality for power and making it clear that she will not be waiting on him any more and he is not welcome to dictate anything about her life anymore. Meanwhile, Milkman has discovered that his other sister, First Corinthians, has entered into a relationship with a man who is part of Guitar's murdering gang. He does not want her associating with this kind of person, but is unable to voice that concern without simultaneously ruining her happiness. This conflict is not something he wishes to be bothered with. As for his father, Milkman has recently learned that the senior Macon Dead did not wish to have another baby with his wife Ruth but she trapped him into it. Macon subsequently tried many ways of having his wife abort the baby. When Milkman was born anyway, his father's way of controlling his whole family and his son, has served as a point of stress for Milkman for his whole life. Finally, this passage highlights Milkman's complicated relationship with his mother, who nursed him well past a point that is socially acceptable. In fact, he received his name because a neighbor witnessed him nursing from his mother while she was kneeling on the floor and he was standing up, nursing milk from her breast. Later, when Milkman tries to get to know her, to understand her motivations to nurse him until so late in his life, she reveals how lonely and sexually deprived she has been throughout her marriage to Macon. She tells Milkman how much she loved her father and how intimate she felt with him, although the rumors that their relationship was sexual

are not true. Milkman feels overwhelmed when she reveals these intimate details to him. In fact, he feels guarded and turned off by learning all of these intimate details about his family members. Therefore, despite his fear of the pain of death, he lies and waits for Hagar's approach and fantasizes about the release that death would afford him. In many ways, for Milkman death is not the worst option because it would allow him to avoid the intimacy of loving relationships in life. Later, when Hagar actually does enter the apartment, Milkman thinks, "Now it was all going to end. In a little while she would walk in the door and this time he would let her do it. Afterward there would be no remembrance of who he was or where"

(128). Death is an escape and a release for him, not a source of fear.

Hagar shares the same view of death: that it is not something to fear. However, she does not fear death because she believes that it can bring people closer and bind them. After her heart is broken by Milkman, "Hagar was energized by the details of her mission. She stalked him. Whenever the fist that beat in her chest became that pointing finger, when any contact with him at all was better than none, she stalked him. She could not get his love...so she settled for his fear"

(128). Hagar's desire to connect with Milkman in an intimate way but resorting to death when she fails is another embodiment of Morrison's message about language and death. Hagar cannot bond with Milkman through language, so inflicting death upon him is another way for her to achieve intimacy. She believes that being the person to bring death to him will bring them closer together.

Milkman's relationship with Hagar before she attempts to murder him once a month points to another connection between the stories in *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*

in Milkman's sexual behavior. Before his migration, Milkman's behavior reflects that he does not hold sex as sacred and an act of bonding two human beings. He becomes infatuated with his cousin Hagar at a young age and the two begin an affair that continues for years. However, once Hagar begins to get older and make the affair easier for Milkman to attain, he loses interest and dumps her by buying her gifts and thanking her in a glib manner for their relationship throughout the years. For Milkman, sex was a physical act and something that kept him occupied. He did not value Hagar on an emotional level. This is another way that he is similar to Sula, but the major difference is how the community receives his acts both of incest and casual sex. His community does not place judgment on Milkman for his sexual choices. And later, when Hagar tries to punish Milkman for rejecting her, the community members shake their heads at her as though she is a crazy girl at her typical antics again. They do not scorn Milkman for treating her in an insensitive way.

Here is the first time we see a major divergence between Milkman's and Sula's stories. Where Sula is completely excluded from the community for her sexual discrepancies, Milkman is unaffected. In fact, he still has the opportunity to climb a social ladder and achieve success through his father's company. By operating through the voice of a male character, Morrison is able to extend her story beyond the point of rejection from the community. Where Sula had no more mobility after she exercised sexual freedom because there were no more opportunities for her within the community, Milkman is still free to explore relationships and form connections with other people. He does not have to spend

any part of his life correcting harm he imposed upon his community through sexual indiscretion. Because he is a male, his casual sexual encounters and even incest are not a hindrance to him in any way.

But being male comes with complications as well and Morrison explores those complications through a conversation with Guitar. This conversation is imperative to Milkman's character development and it is one of the most evident ways in which *Song of Solomon* connects to *Sula*. Milkman and Guitar debate life and death in a similar manner as Sula and Nel did as Sula lay dying. They similarly discuss what it truly means to want someone, to take someone, and to own someone. While Nel and Sula debated who betrayed whom when their friendship ended because Sula slept with Jude, which then led to the question of what it means to leave a person, Guitar and Milkman debate what it means for someone to want your life. When Milkman complains that everyone around him seems to want something from him, Guitar agrees completely but argues that it's not just about Milkman, it's about all black men. While Milkman is wondering what people want from him, Guitar answers, "[t]hey want your life, man." To this, Milkman responds, "No. Hagar wants my life. My family...they want-" and as Milkman attempts to find the words to explain, Guitar responds, "I don't mean that way. I don't mean they want your dead life; they want your living life"(222). Although Milkman is destined to develop a firmer grasp on life, death, connectedness and relationships, at this point Guitar is the one with the insight.

Guitar believes that a person can desire and claim another's living life and that is exactly what most people want to do to black men. Guitar says, "It's the

condition our condition is in. Everybody wants the life of a black man. Everybody. White men want us dead or quiet – which is the same thing as dead. White women, same thing. They want us, you know, ‘universal,’ ‘human no ‘race consciousness.’ ... ‘And black women, they want your whole self. Love, they call it, and understanding’” (222). This conversation directly replies to Sula’s conversation with Nel on her deathbed when she said, “ ‘You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?’ ” While Guitar sees that everyone wants something from a black man, a black woman is the worst because she disguises her desire for ownership as love as a rebuttal to Sula’s claim. Sula thinks that being black and being a woman should put her in the same category as a man because the afflictions black women have faced should place them with the ability to be independent and think freely. Guitar sees the black woman as parasite that wants to drain a black man’s life. And perhaps this is what Sula argues when she criticizes Nel for losing herself in the identity of her husband.

In the above quote, Guitar also argues that being dead is the same as being silent, a point that Pilate, with her regular conversations with her dead father, would surely contest. Guitar’s view on death foreshadows that his philosophy will diverge from Milkman’s because Milkman will follow Pilate’s ideas.

Guitar believes that everyone in the world wants something from a black man and that Milkman should not be surprised to feel like people want to pull energy and life force from him because this is the way life is: people want to bond with you and, in doing so, drain your life and make you feel closer to death. Guitar goes on to say, “ ‘You can’t even die unless it’s about them. What good is a man’s life

if he can't even choose what to die for?" When Milkman replies, "Nobody can choose what to die for," Guitar says, "Yes you can, and if you can't, you can damn well try to" (223). For Guitar, even if a person can't make a decision about his death, at least he can try to be mindful of it. And at least he can make the decision not to let anyone else control his death. In a far more dramatically articulated way, Guitar argues the same view as Sula. He doesn't want to die for anyone else, he wants to live and die for himself. But just as Sula was drawing too firm a line between her and Nel, Guitar is mistaken to be so selfish about his death and he misses the aspect of death that is the opportunity to connect. From this conversation forward, Milkman is the one who will take these ideas about death and relationships, process them, make them his own, and head down a path of transcendent understanding of death.

Although this conversation serves as a solid foundation on which Milkman can start to process an understanding of death and relationships, he cannot truly develop his own ideas on these subjects until he leaves his hometown. Unlike Sula, Milkman does not leave his community fearlessly and without regret to intentionally seek his own enrichment. Milkman leaves because he feels suffocated in his hometown and feels the need to escape. But the desire to escape, which is his true desire to leave is hidden behind a subordinate journey, which is to recover gold that his family claims is buried in a cave. Milkman has agreed to split the gold with Guitar and, although Guitar has reservations about trusting Milkman, he agrees that the best thing to do is let Milkman go to obtain the gold on his own. Where Sula leaves and struts away as she goes, Milkman is released and his plunge into another

world is slow and fragmented. His journey calls for him to retrace familial roots, meeting estranged family members, and hearing stories of his father, his aunt, and other relatives who he has never even heard of, but who slowly begin to become significant to him. Unlike Sula who builds her sense of self from traveling away from home and her family roots, Milkman builds his identity by reconnecting with his family's history.

Milkman goes on a quest that starts with his search for gold but quickly becomes a quest for his familial identity. As he travels deeper and deeper into rural American, finding more information about his ancestors, he encounters characters and communities that are much different from his city life. People move at a slower pace, expect conversation, and refuse to allow Milkman to ask questions pertaining to his agenda without telling him their own story. In one conversation regarding a distant relative, Milkman learns that his great grandmother Ryna was of Native American decent and is famous for her sorrow when her husband took one of their sons and left the rest of the family behind. According to the legend, "she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more – the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something" (323). This is exactly Sula's point: she refuses to be one of these women and it is exactly what she has observed about Nel and the other women in their community. When Milkman hears this story, he is filled with a mysterious pride at the thought of his great-grandfather flying away from poverty and suffering. It is a powerful thought, deeply rooted in African culture. However, Milkman also grasps the deep

sadness in the perspective of Ryna, the woman who is left. In this legend, the twin stories: that of a man being inspired enough to fly and that of a woman being left are juxtaposed. Milkman does not fail to recognize the effects of these dual traditions in his own family where his father is successful but shutdown and his mother idolizes her dead father because she is unable to connect to any living relative. When Milkman learns about his family history, he learns about having compassion for his living relatives.

His progress is represented by when the limp he has had his whole life begins to improve. Like the imagery of Sula's feet presented when she returns from her time away from The Bottom, we see imagery of Milkman's legs and feet here. For him, this imagery represents the progress and transformation he has made. Milkman's feet, which root him in the only history he has known, begin to lighten and ease as he learns new history; a history that empowers him and releases him. Milkman does not go as far as to fly like his relatives who flew away from slavery and poverty, but his feet, his limp, his otherness are less stuck than when he started. Karin Luisa Badt argues that Morrison focuses on the breaking and reparation of bodies throughout her texts because it is a way of reforming the ego. She states, "All of Morrison's novels begin with individuals who have an unsatisfactory relation to themselves and others. They lack a true sense of centeredness; a core self, and they are drawn to the body of the (m)other in order to restore the integrity of their own. Boundaries must be blurred before they can be remade." (*The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A Matter of "Ancient Properties"* 568). Badt's argument examines the relationship of the major characters in

Morrison's text to their mothers and to metaphorical and literal wombs. However, her words can also be interpreted to explain why many of Morrison's character, Milkman and Sula included, indulge in carnal urges such as sex and, in Milkman's case, a hunt. Sula claimed that she felt the most in touch with herself and at peace when she was involved in an act of sex. Similarly, Milkman feels the most peace he has felt when he is hunting for a bobcat in the night. He enters into the woods for the hunt as the same man he has always been but he emerges very different. This is mostly due to his near death experience at the hands of Guitar, but the fact that his limp is healed upon emergence from the forest represents the simultaneous restoration of his ego. Just as Morrison paints a vivid picture of Sula's feet when she returns to The Bottom, severing her body parts in order to represent the recompilation of her sense of self, Milkman's legs and feet are parsed from his body and healed, in order to show his grasp on his identity.

Further evidence of parsing of parts occurs immediately after the hunt, when the men are skinning and essentially dissecting their bobcat conquest. The men hang the cat from a hook and begin to skin it, allowing each body part to become exposed and fall bit by bit. As Milkman observes this scene, he experiences the most intense fusion of philosophy and experience that we witness in this novel. This moment is the culmination of every concept he has been ruminating on throughout his journey away from home, including the intense conversations he had with Guitar about being a family member, being black, being male, feeling love, feeling connection. The bobcat lays on a slab of cement and it is not a coincidence that the first thing the men do is slice through ropes that bind the cat's feet. Just as Milkman

has been freed of his impairment, finally able to confront the ways in which he is and always will be exposed, the cat is also finally ready to be exposed in the deepest ways possible.

The dissection of the cat feels ceremonial as the men incise and slice part by part and Milkman echoes each curve of the knife with a swirl of his own thoughts. When the men turn the limp body on its back and release it from the ropes, Milkman's brain echoes, "Everybody wants a black man's life" (281). As the men slice down the bobcat's belly, Milkman thinks, "Not his dead life; I mean his living life" (281). Here, the men cut the cat's genitals and Milkman remembers more of Guitar's words, "It's the condition our condition is in" (282). The men continue to tear apart the legs and neck of the cat and Milkman remembers thinking, "What good is a man's life if he can't even choose what to die for?" (282). And as the men cut the fingers, Milkman recalls, "Everybody wants the life of a black man." With each slow, deliberate, reverent cut of the body, Milkman remembers part of this same conversation with Guitar, finally ending on: "It is about love. What else but love? Can't I love what I criticize? ...It's about love. What else? ... What else? What else? What else?" (282). The castration and dissection of the bobcat mirrors Guitar's description of the plight of the black man: not only does everyone want your life but they want your manhood and your death. However, in the end, the most important thing is love: the way you connect with and treat others. Once again, as we saw on Sula's deathbed and in Chicken Little's death, we see here, a fusion of love and death. Milkman witnesses what could be a gruesome, violent scene, but it leads him

to thoughts about love and to memories of one of the most connected, brutal, yet intimate conversations he's ever had.

As Milkman experiences body and mind fusing while watching what is happening to the bobcat, it would be a mistake to belittle the fact that what he is recalling are memories of his conversation with Guitar. While that conversation, in which Guitar tried to impress humanity as well as allegiance and awareness of racial conditions upon Milkman is reminiscent of Sula's conversation with Nel on Sula's deathbed, this moment recalls the fact that, as Sula dies, her last desire is to share the experience with Nel. Neither Sula nor Milkman embarks upon his or her developmental and independent experiences alone. Each is completely connected to others. Death may be the meaning of life, but language is the measure.

And, indeed, in the bobcat scene, language is truly the measure. When the dismemberment of the body is finished and the men are preparing to eat the cat, "Milkman looked at the bobcat's head. The tongue lay in its mouth as harmless as a sandwich. Only the eyes held the menace of the night" (283). Long after death, the tongue is left and the eyes still have life. The rest of the body is one thing and the feet were the first thing to be cut, indicating the transcendent power of death; the fact that a being can separate from his earthly life is indicated by the initial release of the feet. However, as long as the ability for language exists, there is still life.

And thus, after his experience in the woods, his brush with death, his rebirth into the light of day, the processing of his philosophies and values and the true connection to Guitar's words in the presence of death, Milkman's story picks up where Sula left off. Where Sula's last thoughts are a desire to connect to Nel, to

share her death experience with her friend, Milkman's thoughts now also express a desire to connect to the people in his life, especially his friend Guitar, whose words were with him during the greatest turning point of his life. We see that, "[Milkman] felt a sudden rush of affection for them all, and.... he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him" (278). Milkman contemplates his conversations with Guitar, as well as brushes with death at Guitar's hand, therefore going further than Sula was able to in terms of fusing her death with connecting with her friend. This is the point where *Song of Solomon* surpasses *Sula* in conveying Morrison's message about the power of language.

Milkman's journey away from home, his connection to his familial roots, his interaction with death, his desire to make another understand him, teach him measurable lessons. For example, now, instead of feeling disgust and hatred toward his mother, when he reflects upon her plight, he thinks, "What might she have been like had her husband loved her?" (300). Over the course of his journey, Milkman has learned empathy, something Sula did not accomplish.

However, it is not easy for Milkman to go further with connecting to Guitar or family at this point. His reputation of selfishness is difficult to clear and, although he has processed thoughts of connection to his friend, Guitar does not actually know about any of it. There has not been any external intercourse between the two since Milkman left town. As a result all the language of connection that we observe through Milkman's internal dialogue does not leave his head. Language can only attain half of its connecting power if it is not communicated to another person. This is evidenced here when Milkman reflects that, "Guitar had never seen Milkman give

anybody a hand, especially a stranger; he also knew that they'd discussed it, starting with Milkman's not coming to his mother's rescue in a dream he had. Guitar had accused him of selfishness and indifference; told him he wasn't serious, and didn't have any fellow feeling – none whatsoever" (298). Milkman goes from selfishness to connectedness while maintaining a sense of self. However, others have no reason to begin trusting him because they have no way of seeing the transformation he has undergone. Milkman realizes that this moment, where he almost attains the intimacy of true connection to Guitar, Guitar has no reason to desire that from him. Guitar still believes Milkman stole the gold they promised to split and wants to kill Milkman for betraying him. While Milkman has transcended beyond the point of "wanting a black man's life," and has gone into the stage where love rules, Guitar is still stuck at wanting to bring death. Further evidence to Milkman's development is that he understands that Guitar must feel this way. Communicating his change of perspective and newfound understanding will be Milkman's challenge to come.

When Milkman returns home his main goals are to use language to bond with the people he cares about. He wants to tell the stories he has learned about his family history to his father and aunt and to communicate to Guitar that he did not steal their gold. While he is not successful in communicating with his father or conveying his true intentions to Guitar, it is no surprise that he succeeds in connecting with Pilate. She is the character most predisposed to understand the journey that Milkman has been through. She understands that death can be transient, while connecting to other humans is more permanent. In fact, one of the pieces of information Milkman wants to express to her is that when she hears her

dead father repeating “You just can’t fly off and leave a body,” (332) he is not referring to the man Macon killed in the cave. He actually referring to himself because his own remains were buried in the cave and Pilate has been carrying his bones with her for years. The bones are a metaphor showing the Pilate has been keeping her father’s literal remains with her, as well as his spiritual presences with her for years. This message is reminiscent of Morrison’s own suffering regarding her father’s death. When a person we love passes, it is as though we carry their bones with us wherever we go. Additionally, Pilate’s father continues to communicate with her beyond the grave

Unfortunately, Pilate does not have much time to absorb Milkman’s news, as she becomes the first victim in what becomes a physical manifestation of Milkman and Guitar grappling with philosophies of death and bonding. Just as Pilate is about to use the information Milkman has told her to pay tribute to her relatives and gain closure, “She reached up and yanked her earring from her ear, splitting the lobe. Then she made a little hole with her fingers and placed in it Sing’s snuffbox with the single word Jake ever wrote. She stood up then, and it seemed to Milkman that he heard the shot after she fell” (335). Pilate connects to her ancestry, while simultaneously connecting to Milkman in the moments before her death. She ceremoniously digs a grave for the last remain of her grandmother, Sing, at the same moments as she falls to her own death. In *Song of Solomon*, death and bonding are inseparable and the reader is left to decide which is more significant. Herman Beavers observes that, “[t]he bonding, intimacy, and connection happen at the exact same moment, within the same sentence, as Pilate’s death. Self-ownership comes,

she insists, when men give themselves up to those forces beyond their grasp. As the suffering of her Southern men informs us, the elusive daydream is best reached by collaborative means" (Beavers 75). Through death, Pilate has brought meaning to her life. She has understood the deaths of her relatives and now she will experience her own death. Simultaneously, language has determined the measure of her life and those of her ancestors. Because their stories are communicated, their lives are seemingly extended.

In the moment of his aunt's death, Milkman's transcendent view of death and the lessons he has learned about human connection culminate in the way that Pilate's did. Instead of running for his life or hiding, Milkman rises from his aunt's dead body and heads toward the predator, Guitar wielding a gun. Milkman calls out to his former friend "You want me? Huh? You want my life?" Guitar's and Milkman's roles have reversed by this point in the novel. Instead of Milkman being the usurper who sucks the energy from those around him, Guitar is the one who wants to terminate Milkman's life and has already killed Pilate. It is noteworthy that Milkman uses words here as he moves toward Guitar. Just as Sula tried to communicate with Nel on her deathbed, missing the mark, Milkman uses language as he physically moves closer to his friend. Milkman's progress in connecting goes a step further than Sula's as, where she is left wishing for connection beyond her last moments, Milkman achieves connection. "As fleet and bright as a lone star he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you could ride it" (337). He fuses with Guitar so that their

deaths are indistinguishable. Milkman has learned the epitome of Morrison's lessons: that once a person lets go of fearing death, realizing that the most important thing to do is to bond with another person, he can experience a life measured in a positive way.

Milkman learns the lessons Sula would not and could not because her gender and race backed her into a corner where she could not be strong and still carry out Morrison's messages. He understands that language is more powerful than death and he becomes so bound to another human being that even their deaths are connected. Where Sula was left wishing she could share her experience with Nel, Milkman completely shares his death with Guitar. That part of the revision is successful, but Milkman still dies in the end of the novel. He does not become a living embodiment of Morrison's message. So she does not stop there.

Chapter IV

Beloved

In her foreword to *Beloved*, Morrison writes that in order to write this particular novel, “the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive.” In *Beloved*, Morrison pulls together ways in which the relationship between death and language have haunted her previous work. Where Sula grapples with expectations for her gender and claws her way into a niche in a community that does not know what do with her besides cast her as a scapegoat and dream of her demise. Where she is so busy protecting and thrashing out in desperation to preserve her freedom during life that she is unable to recognize the importance of human connection until her death. Where Milkman became buried in his gender role, going through motions of what was expected of him, unable to embrace his individuality until leaving his hometown, recognize the need for true connection, but still unable to achieve it in life. Where Milkman and Sula exemplified that death is the meaning of life but language is the measure as two separate camps, in *Beloved* we get a character, Sethe, who unites these ideas.

Morrison expresses her full thesis through a character who lives in times of slavery, where expectations of gender are eclipsed by expectations of humanity. She is a woman who is granted permission to be powerful because it is absolutely

necessary in order to survive. Her circumstances as a former slave position her in such a way that the white man is not a silent antagonist, gently weaving his expectations and economic chokeholds into her life and the lives of those around her. By contrast, the white man is the explicit enemy and her society must exist in total separation from white society. In this way, slavery actually facilitates Morrison's ability to comment on the relationship between death and language. In the same introduction to *Beloved*, Morrison says, "to render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way" (Morrison, xix).

Because this novel is set in times of slavery, it raises questions of humanity, freedom, relationships, language, and death in profound and palpable ways. When *Beloved* asks Sethe about whether or not her mother brushed her hair, for example, Sethe's response goes almost immediately from simply saying that her mother did not brush her hair into an elaborate story, explaining that, in fact, her mother only nursed her for about two to three weeks before she went back to working in the field and the relationship between the two became more or less estranged. Sethe goes on to say that one of her only concrete memories of her mother was when her mother showed her a burn mark under her breast and said, " 'This is you ma'am. This,' ... 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark'"(72). This story, especially in response to such a seemingly benign question, and especially because Sethe shares it during a casual and playful moment, brings gravity to the time period in which this novel is set. An identity quest is not simply about gender roles and an exclusive white elitist society that bars black men from

jobs. It's not about the white-powered society that only opens a specific sliver of space for blacks in which they are welcome to exploit other black people. No, this is slavery. This is people who are treated as animals. This is the kind of world where a mother bonds with her daughter by showing her a scar and prepares her to not recognize her face someday. And, in fact, that day does come, but when it does, her mother's body and face are both so badly maimed there is no recognizing of anything – face, scar, or anything else. Because of the setting of this novel, readers who are accustomed to Morrison's descriptions and imagery that causes us to ache for the slow-breaking of humanity in her characters, are instantly gutted, identifying Sethe's pain, pledging, whether unconsciously, allegiance to this woman and her struggle to hold onto her humanity. And it is with this loyalty that Morrison finds the space to explore the relationships between death and language in a way that she has not yet done.

Beloved fuses language and death as concepts perfectly. Because *Beloved* is a ghost, she communicates through death. Others can hear her and shape their identities, or realize their identities in relationship to her. Even before she manifests as a girl and is simply a presence in the house, she is influencing Sethe and Denver. Her ghost throws things, moves things, chases people away, plagues Denver's brothers until they finally leave. Although they are confused by the ghost's actions and clueless about what to do about it, the ghost is a part of Sethe and Denver's everyday lives. At the beginning of the novel, we see that "together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air. For they

understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew the source of light”

(4). For Sethe and Denver, the death that is present in their house and has woven itself into their lives does not need to be discussed. They know why it's there, they know what it wants, they know the ghost and their relationship with it bonds them while isolating them from the rest of the community. This ghost is a major aspect in the meaning of their lives.

At this point in the novel, Sethe and Denver are only experiencing one half of Morrison's equation: that death brings meaning to life. For Denver, the ghost fills a void of loneliness because it can keep her company, even if the company is negative. When Paul D first arrives at the house and scares the ghost away, Denver thinks, “now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had” (23). Denver does not have relationships with other people in the community and thus this ghost is the only relationship she has. They may not speak words to each other, but simply her presence is enough communication to ward off total lonesomeness.

For Sethe, she constantly has a reminder of and closeness to the daughter she has lost. The closest that either Denver or Sethe comes to attaching some sort of language to the dead child is with the word that Sethe has put on her grave: Beloved. Although Sethe had to trade ten minutes of sex acts with the preacher in order to obtain that name on the grave, she is satisfied by what she has accomplished. She thinks, “what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered” (5). Sethe cared a lot about the one word that was attached to her daughter and she was willing to sacrifice to get that word in place. Later, she thinks,

“those ten minutes she spent pressed up against the dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil” (6). For Sethe, the act she undertook in exchange for those words on the grave was more severe than the act that put the baby in the grave in the first place because killing the baby was an act of love. But it was worth it for her to communicate how she felt about this baby; that despite accusations and assumptions, this baby was loved from the moment she was born until the moment her mother killed her.

And this kind of attitude about the choices that mothers make for their children when it comes to death is not unnatural for someone like Sethe. Like Milkman and Sula, Sethe comes from a history of women who have traversed the line between death and love. Sethe’s mother was brought to America on a slave ship and endured rape and abuse. While she was being transported, she and a woman, who Sethe called Nan, had similar experiences and, because Sethe’s mother was assigned the role of working in the fields, it is Nan who explains her mother’s history to Sethe. Nan says, “Telling you. I am telling, small girl Sethe. She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Tell you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe’ (74).” Sethe came from a history of a mother who killed her children. For her, the circumstance was different. She killed them because they were the product of rape, hate, and abuse. She killed them because they would be

half white, and embody the pain that she had felt when she was with them. She killed them because they may be born on a slave ship. But she kept Sethe because she wrapped her arms around Sethe's father and she deemed him worthy of naming her daughter for. To say that she loved him is too grand an inference to make. What we do know is that Sethe was not the product of rape. And, as a result, her mother did not kill her.

This passage, in which we discover how Sethe found out details of her history, is also significant because of the way in which Nan conveys the message to Sethe, bookended with the phrase, "I am telling you." This is another example of Morrison fusing death with language. We discover details about Sethe's history that include her mother killing her babies, because of language. The art of storytelling, here preserves her mother's actions in Sethe's mind. It contributes to the measure of Sethe's life and the life of her mother because it allows language to tell their stories, to explain their actions, to build their identities, to preserve their memories.

From the perspective of white society, mothers killing their children seems crazy, selfish, possessed. Simultaneously, a man like Milkman who cannot connect to another human being without connecting to his past may seem pathetic. But Sethe's position is different. Her sense of otherness happens because she is a victim of her circumstance. She does not fuse with a community initially because the community to which she did fuse was disbanded in violent acts when the plantation that she worked on was overtaken. Sethe had friends and someone she loved and connected with, but those connections were brutally taken away, leaving her as an "other" because she is alone and an escaped slave.

Though in a very different context from either Milkman or Sula, Sethe also leaves the community in which she grew up, finds a deeper connection to herself, and then has a difficult time reintegrating into a stable society after having built an identity that allows her to make decisions that she believes are right for herself and her family. Sethe's migration experience happens under the conditions of a complete desolation of humanity. Sethe is pregnant and runs from a violent gang of plantation owners who have already demonstrated bestial and remorseless behavior by pinning her down and nursing her breasts void of the milk that she still had for her baby who had gone ahead to escape. Now that Sethe has somehow managed to go after her children, she traverses the woods, avoiding houses, trying to make it to safety. As she does this, Morrison uses familiar imagery as we saw with Milkman emerging from the hunt and with Sula when she returned home from her travels: images of feet. At the beginning of Sethe's description of her journey away from the plantation, she says, "how [she] was walking on two feet meant for standing still. How they were so swollen she could not see her arch or feel her ankles. Her leg shaft ended in a loaf of flesh scalloped by five toenails" (36). Sethe's feet carried her away from the plantation, and toward a safer place. But her feet are human, they are not meant for traversing such terrain for such a long time. Sethe is a human being with limitations and expiration. And the thing that signal to her that she must stop at some point, that she can't continue forever, are her feet. So, after pain has eclipsed pride, Sethe lies on her back, in the middle of the forest, and waits for death.

But instead of death, something else comes to Sethe. It is a young white girl named Amy Denver, who helps her at this moment of near death. Just as Milkman almost dies in the middle of the dark forest during the hunt, Sethe would have died in this forest if Amy Denver hadn't stopped to help nurture her and deliver her baby. The scene in which Denver, the baby, is born is full of maternal imagery, but even before the birth, we get the impression that Sethe herself is in womb, being reborn, before giving birth to her daughter. Amy Denver takes Sethe into a small man-made structure and:

Gathered rocks, covered them with more leaves and made Sethe put her feet on them, saying: 'I know a woman had her feet cut off they was so swole.' And she made sawing gestures with the blade of her hand across Sethe's ankles.... Then she did the magic: lifted Sethe's feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salt tears. 'It's gonna hurt, now,' said Amy. 'Anything dead coming back to life hurts.' (42)

The focus on Sethe's feet, her connection to humanity, the thing that made her feel like a dignified mother as she hauled herself and her unborn through the woods, in this scene illustrates the fact that Sethe has relinquished control over her earthly sense of belonging. In efforts to save her life and the life of her unborn child, she sacrifices her feet, as she later does with her child. Similarly, her feet come back to life like the ghost that will later manifest as a woman in her house. Amy Denver's words, "anything dead coming back to life hurts," ring true for this moment of physical pain, as well as for the future of the dead revisiting that is to come. Just as Milkman walks easier after his brush with death, Sethe is lightened as her feet heal and she is able to continue on with her child. And, in this moment, as it will in the future, death brings meaning to Sethe's life.

Sethe's journey and that of Milkman or Sula is that Morrison strategically places Sethe's journey earlier in the novel. Unlike Milkman and Sula, who die before they are able actualize connection with other humans, Sethe goes through her journey earlier, works out her relationship with death earlier, and is able to round out her story with connection to those around her and integrate into the community, but it takes time, time Milkman and Sula were not granted.

First, just as Milkman and Sula were outcasted from their communities because of behaviors that were geared toward their own benefits, Sethe's "otherness" continues beyond being an escaped slave. When she finally does make it to Ohio and the house where her children are living with Baby Suggs, their grandmother, she enjoys eighteen days of happiness with her children before School Teacher comes to find them and she murders her daughter to protect her, thus ostracizing her and her other children from the community.

And this is where Sethe's story continues on beyond a point that either Milkman or Sula were able to go. Like Milkman and Sula, her mark as a person who will connect language with death is a focus on her feet. Not only do her feet come into focus when she gives birth to Denver, but they are also a focal point of her first interaction with Paul D in years. At the moment he shows up on her front porch, Sethe is walking back from a field, barefoot and covered in chamomile. When Paul D sees her for the first time, he says, " 'How you been girl, besides barefoot?' (7)." Later, the image of Sethe's bare legs and feet become something that is stuck in Paul D's mind whenever he remembers seeing her again for the first time. There is a wildness about it in his mind.

However, the wildness is quelled when she almost immediately steps into the house and begins to cook him dinner. Sethe's feet represent the wild that Sula possessed and connects to the deep, gender and generation-laden wounds of Milkman. But Sethe is different because she has a house and children and components of domesticity grounding her, preventing further progress, but attracting Paul D. When Paul D and Sethe discuss living together and learning to trust one another, he says: "Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. (55)" This conversation with Paul D is the exact conversation that Sula could never have and never wanted. The thought of being able to depend on a man was too terrifying and came at too high a price. But for Sethe, it seems that she can trust Paul D and their choice to cohabitate could lead to a healthy dredging up of past stories in order to formulate a healthy version of self in the present. It is not insignificant that Paul D mentions that he will hold her feet when she dives into whatever it is that he views as deep. For him, this means that he will hold onto her humanity, keep her fresh and rooted, as she explores what she needs to explore.

So, disregarding the wild of Sethe's bare feet, Paul D decides to stay and she decides to let him. The two begin to reconnect by telling stories of Sweet Home, the plantation from which they both fled. The story telling that they engage in immediately connects them and begins to stir old memories for both characters. It is after this connection to Paul D that she is seemingly released from her bounds to life as she knows it, and she is able to begin to connect. However, as the novel

progresses and we see Paul D struggle with his manhood in relationship to the women of the house, it becomes evident that connecting with Paul D, remembering the dead without the dead, is not enough for Sethe. After Paul D discovers what she did to her daughter and leaves, he mentally admits:

it occurred to him that what she wanted for her children was exactly what was missing in 124: safety. Which was the very first message he got the day he walked through the door. He thought he had made it safe, had gotten rid of the danger; beat the shit out of it; run it off the place and showed it and everybody else the difference between a mule and a plow. And because she had not done it before he got here her own self, he thought it was because she could not do it. That she lived with 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice (...) The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle's girl was obedient (like Halle), she (like Halle), and work-crazy (like Halle). He was wrong. The here Sethe was new (...) This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here Sethe didn't know where the world stopped and she began. (193)

When Paul D arrived at the house and saw Sethe and heard about the ghost, he assumed that she was weak. He assumed that she needed a man to come in and ward off the being that she was victimized by. But she did not need him at all and she was not the victim: she was the murderer. He admits in this passage that the person he was sleeping with, living with, engaging in partnership with, was not so much an individual in his eyes, as she was an imitation of Halle, her husband, who had been like a brother to him. Paul D did not permit an identity for Sethe beyond someone who needed him. He liked the idea of being that man who held her ankles as she engaged in wild identity adventures. But what he didn't know was that those ankles had been transformed and were intangible long ago. There was no holding onto Sethe. She was on her own path, had made her own decisions, and was not sorry for them. She didn't need protecting because she knew how to seize her own

agency. What Sethe needs is not a man to protect her from death or from losing her humanity; she's already discovered that death is the meaning of her life and accepted that. What she needs now is the second component, language, to give it measure. That is what she thought Paul D was, but it is what he was not. And so where Sethe could not defend against his belittling, patronizing attitude the way that Sula did, death in the form of her murder of her child does it for her. It is when Sethe is under Paul D's umbrella of false connection that Beloved appears.

Beloved is the metaphorical embodiment of what happens when death and language are linked. Through her relationship with Beloved, Sethe explores that connection between life and death that allows her to continue to explore her sense of self. Because of Beloved, Sethe begins to open up about her past, tell stories of what has happened to her. She does it because she can see that this is what Beloved wants. As she tells stories about her past, Sethe begins to realize that she enjoys telling the stories. For example, when Beloved asks about Sethe's earrings and Sethe delves into detail of where she got them, why and how, Sethe thinks, "as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it - in any case it was an unexpected pleasure (69)." Sethe enjoys the language that is exchanged through storytelling. It allows her to connect to others, release thoughts that plague her, and add an element of rhetoric to stories which have lived only inside of her.

Beloved's presence is divergent from Sula's and Mikman's stories because she is the embodiment of death and language in one. During a memorable scene in which Sethe is connecting to yet another dead spirit, that of Baby Suggs, Beloved

actually attempts to strangle her, using supernatural powers. As Sethe is remembering Baby Sugg's spiriting, she feels "fingers touching the back of her neck [that] were stronger now - the strokes bolder....Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around toward her windpipe, making little circles....Sethe was actually more surprised than frightened to find that she was being strangled" (113). As penance for attempting to strangle Sethe, Beloved cools her bruised neck with her freezing fingers and then begins kissing Sethe's neck and chest. Sethe enjoys the sensation for a short period but then quickly chastises Beloved, saying "'You too old for that.'" (115). With this scene, we get another correction from *Song of Solomon*. Where Ruth allowed Milkman to nurse from her long beyond a time that he could walk and talk, Sethe puts an end to Beloved's childlike impulses before they are able to manifest themselves. Cutting off the more basic pathogen before it can manifest itself allows the relationships to progress from this point into more profound corners of their relationship.

Another major difference in this novel is that, as Sethe underwent her journey of self-exploration by communication with Beloved, she was not alone. Unlike Sula, who only had Nel to connect with in childhood, or Milkman, who connected with Guitar only in the moment of his death, Sethe had Denver all along. Her daughter was there listening vigilantly, participating intentionally, and feeling protective over her mother. Because Denver heard the language exchanged between Beloved and Sethe, she absorbed her mother's journey of integrating language with death. Beloved had to be there, in flesh, in order to ask Sethe the

questions she did, in order for Denver to hear the answers and participate. The two needed the manifestation of death. It is what allowed them to connect.

Sethe is not accustomed to this kind of communication because she and Baby Suggs had agreed long ago that they would not share stories of Sweet Home with Denver in an effort to protect her. What Sethe doesn't realize is that, by withholding these stories that are about Denver, yet not really about Denver because they are about her relatives or took place during times that she was too young to remember, she is actually starving Denver of connecting to the piece of her past and history without which she cannot thrive. As with Sethe, who came into her identity as a result of the old woman Nan repeating that she is "telling her" about her mother and her past, Denver craves the stories that piece her life together. Beloved's questions make Sethe remember parts of herself and come back to truths about her identity. She builds her sense of self through language, as a result of death. And, as an inadvertent side effect, of telling stories to Beloved, Denver is also hearing the stories, and her identity is able to develop in addition to deepening the connection with her mother.

Beloved's desire to hear stories, to encourage communication extends from Sethe to Denver. As they fall asleep at night, Beloved encourages Denver to tell her the story of when Sethe gave birth to her. Beloved echoes Nan when she says, "Tell me....Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat (90)". So, Denver tells Beloved the story again.

And Beloved's power applies to Paul D as well. He has his memories locked up in what he refers to as a "tobacco tin lodged in his chest." He believes that "by

the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open” (133). This metaphor represents a similar coping mechanism to that which Sethe uses. He has repressed his emotions about what happened at Sweet Home and doesn’t think about them or talk about them, except in very small doses with Sethe. However, after Beloved seduces him, Morrison describes that “he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it” (138). Beloved has used a different way to reach Paul D than she did with Sethe or Denver; she uses sex, but it is equally as effective in getting him to open up, to communicate more, to use language to forge connection. After his sexual encounters with Beloved, Paul D finds himself discussing Sweet Home with Sethe, revealing emotional memory, and even daring to express his desire to have a child with Sethe, thus looking toward a future with hope. Paul D’s encounter with death, in the form of Beloved, enhances his communication and connecting abilities, just as it does the other characters.

In the case of Denver, connection to others exists almost completely on the plane of language in the form of storytelling. Aside from her relationship with her mother and grandmother, Denver has not had much communication with other people in her life. She attended school as a child but was quickly socially rejected because of her mother’s reputation. She soon withdrew completely, relying completely on her mother for linguistic, emotional, and cognitive nourishment. However, because the past is so painful to relive, Sethe does not share many stories or emotions with Denver at all. When Beloved appears, Denver is the happiest because Beloved offers companionship and, equally as importantly to

Denver, Beloved inspires Sethe to tell stories of her past, which are also components of Denver's own history. The ways in which stories unfold to us the same way they unfold to Denver: choppy and in circles and Morrison allows the reader to feel Denver's frustration. As bits of stories are presented to us in ways that force us to piece together major events in these characters' pasts. We don't even find out that Sethe slit her daughter's throat, for example, until long after Beloved has come to stay with the family. The starvation that the reader feels as we ache for more details as to who Beloved is and what exactly Sethe did to her "barely crawling" baby makes us feel what Denver must feel when she is left out of the stories that are part of her identity and struggles to piece them together.

However, once the connection was established, Beloved was no longer needed. By the end of the novel, Sethe believes she is in a similar position to the beginning, in which she must kill in order to protect herself and her children from slavery. Again, even after all of the self-exploration that she has undergone because of her relationship with Beloved, Sethe still makes the same decision that she previously did, solidifying her grasp on her identity, as well as her understanding of relationships and death.

Thus death served the purpose that it tried to serve in both *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*: to bind characters and foster true connection between them. Beloved came and eventually allowed for deeper understanding between mother and daughter. And it is through that connection that Sethe is able to integrate into the community.

Because her story happens in the context of slavery, we can more immediately understand not only her actions, but we can also look back upon *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* and understand the characters in those texts as well. It is as though Sethe is the mother from whom Milkman, Sula, Pilate, and Eva generate. And Sethe's mother, raped and tortured on a slave ship, is their grandmother. When we see Sethe as the predecessor for the other two characters, we can understand their story and Morrison's point more clearly:

We, as people, need reminding of our humanity and death reminds us. It reminds us that our lives have meaning, that we have learned lessons, that we loved, and that we have connected. But those lessons, the schooling of which death reminds us, would not have been able to exist without the language that composes it.

Chapter V

Death and Language

In her essay, *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature* Toni Morrison examines the life of African American literature in the literary canon. She delves into the history of canon making, revealing that, “This canonical rerouting from scholasticism to humanism was not merely radical, it must have been (may I say it?) savage. And it took some seventy years to accomplish. Seventy years to eliminate Egypt as the cradle of civilization and its model and replace it with Greece” (130). Instead of starting from African roots, the canon recognizes the origin of literature in Greece, a white society. In doing so, layers are lost; a piece of history is omitted. Her claim is that in seventy years, hundreds of years’ worth of language was erased. However, her larger point is that just because these origins are not widely recognized in the scholarly world, it does not mean pieces of them are not there. She goes on to say, “We can agree, I think, that invisible things are not necessarily “not-there”; that a void may be empty but not be a vacuum. In addition, certain absences are so stressed, so ornate, so planned, they call attention to themselves; arrest us with intentionality and purpose, like neighborhoods that are defined by the population held away from them” (136). Just because something isn’t being said outright does not mean it does not exist or never existed. Something silent, gone, dead, still has the ability to manifest in different

ways. This is true when speaking of literature and it is true for the protagonists in Morrison's novels. Although something is omitted, left out, dead, it can still have a presence in life. Death cannot hold back that which has made its imprint via language and relationships. Morrison's message about the power of language to transcend death prevails in her criticism of the literary canon as it did in her Nobel Speech. Morrison believes in the power of language. What is or is not included in the Literary Canon, for example, can make or break entire cultures. If she believes in literature on this scale, it almost certainly proves my argument that she believes in the power of language to compose an individual and supersede death when it comes to building identity.

In all three of these novels, death brings meaning to life for the protagonists but it is not the measure of their lives. Each character does not realize or appreciate the value of connectedness via language until death intervenes and each character, if only for a moment, goes beyond death to communicate the lesson they have learned. For Trudier Harris, this is completely in line with African traditional thinking. Harris points out that, "If we think of Toni Morrison's work on a continuum from *Sula* (1974), where she begins the transformation of a woman from human being to something other than human where she experiments with sentience beyond death...then *Beloved*, with its emphasis on the temporal transcendence of the grave, is a natural extension of those ideas" (*Fiction and Folklore*, 151). Harris recognizes the commonalities between Morrison's early novels: that the major characters in these novels carry out experiences beyond death and share them with the reader. For Harris, this is not surprising as women in many African American

Folktales are thought to have powers beyond the grave. Women are seen as witches or are credited with abilities to control crops, weather, and fate with their menstrual cycles. It makes sense, therefore, that Sula is a mysterious outsider who has a strange marking on her face and brings a flock of birds with her upon arrival. Her presence is an allusion to a witch figure in African folklore and her power to communicate with the reader beyond the grave is not unique in that genre. Following Sula comes Milkman who may be a man but is guided by a witch-like figure, his aunt Pilate, to go beyond death to bond with his friend and finally take control of his life. Finally, *Beloved* fits perfectly into this “continuum,” as Harris claims. *Beloved* not only toys with the boundaries between life and death; she actually returns from the dead and plays a major role in the lives of her living relatives.

K. Zauditu-Selassie, author of *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* also recognizes the importance of dead figures who return to assist their living relatives in African spirituality. She notes that in at least one African religion, the goddess Oya has the ability to travel between worlds of the living and the dead. She is celebrated and worshipped in African tradition and it is widely accepted that those deceased have the ability to return and intervene in the lives of those that they care for (Zauditu-Selassie 58). Zauditu-Selassie claims that Sula’s desire to see Nel after she has already died, for example, “attests to her ability to communicate between worlds and demonstrates the possibilities of a future, even at the end, confirming her spiritual affinity to Oya, who is able to transcend death” (61). Sula, Milkman, and Sethe all have brushes with death that then allow them to

connect to their friends on deeper levels, and to understand their own existences in more profound ways. It is not until she is dead that Sula sheds her singular desire to be independent in exchange for a yearning to share and connect. In this way, Sula is true to spiritual traditions of ability to be conscious beyond the grave and desire to connect to others after death.

Katy Ryan, author of *Revolutionary Suicide in Toni Morrison's Fiction* points to a similar sentiment that she observes in African American literature and history. Death, particularly in the form of suicide has had a complex past in African literary tradition. Ryan examines documentation of people being taken from Africa who jumped off of slave ships because they believed that death was a better option than whatever fate they were surely sailing toward. Ryan notes that a conception that Africans can fly comes from their fluid relationship with death. She also discusses ways in which suicide changed as a concept for blacks throughout American history that it went from being "a white thing" (391) to being recognized as a mode of recapturing power and agency (392). What started as a way to reclaim agency, to fly away from a doomed existence as Milkman's great grandfather did when he flew away from his family, suicide resurfaced in black culture as a means of asserting control over one's existence. Death became a preferable option to some outcomes in life.

Ultimately, Katy Ryan claims that, "it is acceptable in [African] culture to imagine outcomes and lessons that go beyond death." However, she examines that, although death is generally accepted as a non-finite concept, suicide itself is something that has not been examined as closely. She says that, "[a]lthough this

leap to freedom, and death, haunts African American literature (...), the act of suicide often goes unnamed. And the flying potential of Africans and African Americans as an imagistic and thematic trope has generated far more critical discussion than its metonymic twin, suicide" (389). While death is seen as a road to freedom and leaping and flying are ways in which slaves were seen to have reclaimed their own power, the idea of causing one's own death or the death of another is somewhat unexamined.

And this is the conversation that Toni Morrison enters into with her work. Morrison recognizes the African tradition of death as omnipresent and able to teach lessons. She uses death as it is used in folklore, creating ominous and mysterious characters who transcend death. But, in doing so, she also explores the different ways in which people encounter death and the ways in which it influences them. Herman Beavers states, "Self-ownership comes...when men give themselves up to those forces beyond their grasp" (Beavers, 75). In Morrison's literature, each time a character interacts with death, they also learn something about how to interact with someone else. For Morrison, death, no matter what form it comes in, can teach us to be closer to others and human connection is what triumphs beyond death.

Critics like Beavers and Ryan recognize that attempting to control life is not a worthy cause. One of the few ways that we can exercise agency is through language. *Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction*, by Cynthia A. Davis, was written in 1982, before *Beloved* existed. In this article, Davis connects Sula to Milkman, arguing that each character's method of finding connectedness through death

creates commonalities between them. She notes that, "Milkman Dead finds that only when Guitar Bain shares his dream can he feel 'a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self' (Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, 184)" (325). Davis points to connectedness and understand between individuals as a means of fulfilling potential and coming into one's own identity. Davis argues that Milkman has achieved what Sula could not achieve because he manages to connect to his friend in moments before death. Davis claims that, "Milkman Dead, in Morrison's third novel, finally completes the heroic mission... [and] largely resolves the conflict between freedom and connection" (333). Where Sula embarked on her quest, ruminated actions that develop her identity, and only realized that connectedness was the way to transcend death once she was beyond the grave, Milkman's quest leads him to develop his identity but also move beyond that into a space of relatedness to another before death. According to this interpretation, Milkman has achieved Morrison's thesis that language and connectedness is more meaningful than death.

Davis' argument is similar to mine in that she recognizes the ultimate goal of the protagonist in Morrison's work is to achieve connectedness to another and that death plays a role in bringing the characters closer to their goal. And, at the time that Davis is writing, she is correct to observe, as I did, that Milkman's gender seems to afford him privileges in his quest for closeness that Sula did not receive as a female. In fact, Davis goes on to observe that none of female characters that Morrison had created by this time were blessed with the transcendent abilities combined with self-awareness that would have lead them to Milkman's level of success. Davis states:

Morrison's women can free themselves, like Sula, and be self-defined and disconnected; they can come close to a heroic life. But to serve the heroic integrative function, they need a new myth, in which women too are central, in which it is as important to know why Sing lived her life as why Macon did, and in which Sing's legacy to her descendants is also traced. Morrison has, quite consciously, depicted the male mode of heroism in *Song of Solomon*; it will be interesting to see whether and how she conceives of the female mode. (341)

Davis's argument that *Song of Solomon* is a male-centric story in which the men get voices and backstories and peak our interest in ways that the females do not. Davis observes, as I have, that when Morrison tried to give voice to the female story in *Sula*, the characters end up disconnected and so preoccupied with protecting their identity against sexism and expectations that they do not achieve that connectedness that Milkman eventually finds. Davis' prediction in the form of anticipation when she wonders what it will be like to "see whether and how [Morrison] conceives of the female mode," is nearly prophetic. These questions: how will Toni Morrison take a female character on a quest for identity? How will she preserve African views of death in a female protagonist? How will she demonstrate death's ability to connect us to others and language's ability to transcend death with a heroin? These are the questions that underpin my thesis because my argument is that in 1987, Toni Morrison answered these questions with *Beloved*.

But embracing death is not enough. It is only half of Morrison's argument; half of what she claims to be the venue for gaining true power, understanding, and identity, and half of the stories behind the prominent characters in her early novels. On the other side of death, working just hard in favor of the individual, is

language: the ability to relate to others, to connect, to carry a life beyond the grave, giving it deeper significance.

Morrison puts great value on language throughout each of her texts. Davis, again, writing before *Beloved* was published, realizes that Morrison gives significant time and attention to the idea of naming in her novels. Morrison is sure to indicate the ways in which white people have used their power of naming to manipulate language and thus render power. Davis observes that, in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, “[p]ower for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception. The world of all three novels is distinguished by the discrepancy between name and reality” (324). Naming of objects and people is a powerful form of language because names are a basic tool in identity formation. Names people places, and things is the first interaction that most people have. The person or group of people who controls names is a person with huge power. As Davis states, names change perception. Davis goes on to analyze many cases of manipulative naming in Morrison’s texts:

Sula (1973) begins with a description of the black neighborhood called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills’ (*Sula*, p. 4): another misnamed, even reversed situation, in this case the result of a white man’s greedy joke. The same pattern is extended in *Song of Solomon* (1977): for example, the first pages describe ‘Not Doctor Street, a name the post office did not recognize,’ and “No Mercy Hospital” (*Song*, pp. 3, 4). Both names are unofficial; the black experience they represent is denied by the city fathers who named Mains Avenue and Mercy Hospital. (Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction, 324)

In *Sula*, the town where the novel is set has been misnamed by a white man. This automatically contextualizes the whole novel in a world where white men hold the power, have manipulated black society, and the black population is thus left to carry

on with life in spite of an external factor that exists both subtly and overtly. Just the idea that there is a culture that thrives in spite of a counteracting culture that has named their home that lies on top of the hills “The Bottom” is a significant manipulation of power that demonstrates the ways in which language impacts human relations. Conversely, Davis points to *Song of Solomon*, a novel in which white naming of black places also has major significance in the setting the backdrop of the black community that is the focus of the entire novel. In this case, the black community refers to the hospital and streets in names that have been generated from their culture because they are the ones who live there. However, these are not official names recognized by the white population who controls the laws, maps, and any official documentation in the city. So, on the one hand, you have the people in *Sula*, who exist in a place that has been named for them, and on the other hand, you have the people in *Song of Solomon* who have named their places for themselves but these names are not recognized by the dominating white culture. As Davis states, in both cases, these black communities are “unofficial.” They have no hope of being official from the onset because of their names.

Death and a rising up against abuses delivered by language empower Morrison’s characters to relate to those around them. There is a direct relationship between language and the power a person can execute over another’s physicality and freedoms. Those who own the words are the gatekeepers of society. Mae G. Henderson, author of, *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Re-membering the Body as Historical Text*, argues that, “bodily and linguistic disempowerment frequently intersect”(233). Those who are at a disadvantage with language are at a disadvantage with

power. This is particularly evident with Sethe in *Beloved*. When Sethe lives at Sweet Home and school teacher has taken over, she witnesses him listing all of her traits, putting them in two categories: animal and human. Henderson reminds us of the horror and despair Sethe experiences when she overhears this conversation: “Sethe makes the ink with which Schoolteacher and his nephews define on paper her “animal characteristics”; the ink, a tool for communication produced by her own hand, is turned against her as ammunition for their “weapons” of torture, pen and paper” (233). Sethe is astounded at the pain she feels from words alone and the agony of the ironic fact that she crafted the pen the men are using to name her. But she feels additionally disempowered because, although she understands the concepts and that is all she needs to feel the pain, she does not understand all the words the two men are using. Henderson points out, “Shocked, she asks Mrs. Garner for the definitions of “characteristics” and “features,” vainly attempting to assert control over the words that have conscripted her body in a notebook” (233). It’s as though understanding the exact words used to debase her could give her the power to defend herself.

In a way it does. It is after Sethe hears this and after some of the others have witnessed similarly dehumanizing acts that the slaves of Sweet Home plan their escape. Furthermore, when School Teacher find Sethe and her family in hiding, this listing of traits and characteristics is one of the major reasons Sethe decides that ending her children’s lives is better than allowing them to return to a life where they could be similarly degraded. When Sethe reflects on killing her daughter, she reveals that one of her thoughts was that, “no one, nobody on this earth, would list

her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no" (Morrison, 251). This is an example of the way that language can isolate, disconnect, and rip down a person, just as aptly as it can connect individuals. In this moment of infanticide, Sethe's understanding of death as cyclical and forgiving, as well as her comprehension that language is more powerful because it can bind, as well as disenfranchise, is the culminating moment of Morrison's early work. Both forces, death and language, work together to force Sethe's hand. But the significance lies in the fact that the story does not end here. The kind sides of both energies return: Beloved comes back from the dead to carry on the relationships with her family, and she does so in the form of language and storytelling, eventually bringing them closer to each other and to a community that can support them.

In the concluding moments of *Beloved*, we see Sethe enveloped and protected by the townswomen and we know that Denver is employed by a woman in town and has already been accepted by the community. In a traditional sense, this indicates that the story has ended in a peaceful fashion and that, despite normal hardship, Beloved will not be returning; Sethe can be at peace with her past. According to Zauditu-Selassie, and her studies of African spiritual practices, in African tradition, when an individual has been welcomed into the community, they have a greater power. She notes that, "One of Toni Morrison's recurring literary concerns is the survival of an authentic African American community....Community is the main agent of meaning" (Zauditu-Selassie, 50). According to this belief, and to Morrison's, language and connecting other people is that which gives life significance. If connecting with the community is where characters get their meaning, then Sethe

has succeeded by the end of her journey. She has possessed the transcendent view on death and she has used language to relate to others and give meaning to her life.

This is the same struggle that we see with Milkman as he claws his way to understanding his family and finally connects to his friend in the very end, through death. Sula is disenfranchised from her community and does not see the value in her missed connection until it is too late.

Sula has some attempts at binding and relating at times when death has been prominent. For example, when Chicken Little dies, Sula runs to Shadrack's house to see if he has witnessed the event. This is an aggressive act at a time of death, and one that bonds the characters in a subtle way throughout their lives. Not only are both characters outcasts in the community but they also share the memory of Sula appearing in Shadrack's house and word he spoke to her. Zauditu-Selassie reminds us that this word appears again as Sula lays dying. Zauditu-Selassie says, " 'Always,' this word spoken on her deathbed recalls the guidance given her by Shadrack concerning the permanence of life" (Zauditu-Selassie, 60). This word, the one exchange of verbiage that the two individuals had, is that which she keeps at her death. It is the original intersection of death and language that forms the most permanent connections. Just at a moment when we may think life is ending, language takes us to "always," and shows us that life is permanent and perpetuating.

Zauditu-Selassie points out that some critics attribute Sula's failure to integrate into the community to the fact that she was bad natured from the beginning, while others, "attribute Sula's failed quest to her inability to learn the lesson of true friendship" (55). The fact that Sula could not bind to Nel in the ways

that Sethe was able to bind to Beloved and Denver. She could not drop her quest for individuality in exchange for the quest for intimacy for the reasons discussed in this paper and this is why Sula leaves this life wishing and wanting. She only learned half of Morrison's lesson: that death is the meaning of life. She did not learn how to measure her life with relationships.

Only in *Beloved* is the character able to develop the understanding of death that allows her to drop her barriers and truly connect to others. As Betty Jane Powell states in her article, "'Will the parts hold?': The Journey Toward a Coherent Self in *Beloved*," language is the reason that Sethe is able to continue her life in a healthy way. Powell argues that, "In order to claim ownership Sethe and the other characters must face the past, speak the unspeakable, and chase away the shadows" (105). As I argued above, both Denver and Sethe note that when Beloved arrives, they communicate more. Sethe opens up about her past and begins to tell stories that she has otherwise tried to forget. Denver hears and internalizes these stories because these words compose her identity just as much as they do Sethe's. Through speaking and relating, the characters form closer bonds and stronger senses of identity. Powell says that, "through the recollection and the retelling of fragmented life stories and by forming them into a coherent whole, the characters of *Beloved* free themselves to yoke together stories and bodies, spirit and flesh, and to begin forging a sense of self that holds the promise of the future" (105). There is something spiritual that happens when people are able to bond through language; something that brings more meaning to their lives than the ways they died or how many years they lived.

So, in the end, when Sethe makes the decision for her child that death would be better than a life where she could find her human qualities being listed, a life where language can dehumanize, break connection, constrain, we see that language and relating has more power than death, Morrison conveys her argument, via fiction, to its full extent. And, according to J. Brooks Bouson, Morrison takes her ideas about communication a step beyond her prose. We cannot ignore, when we read Morrison's texts, that urge us to communicate with each other and connect, that she is doing that very thing by writing these novels. Morrison is using communication to invoke emotions that can bind us and she is writing about topics of death that can remind us of our humanity and make us want to bind. Bouson's book *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* explores Morrison's writing as a tool for carrying out her objective to form relationships between people in spite of hardship. Bouson says, "Morrison's novels are also powerful forms of emotional communication, works...that are capable of invoking in readers a range of intensely uncomfortable feelings and that can also induce readers to respond in affective and collusive ways as they participate in the text's drama" (Bouson, 20). We, as readers are not exempt from feelings of shame or trauma, we are not impervious to the effects of race, and we, too, must use language to measure our lives and death to give them meaning. We are participants in the scenarios that Morrison has presented to us. Her language and urging on of relationships does not stop at the fictional characters she has created. By writing these texts, she has called upon us, as readers, to access our humanity and thus access each other.

Part VI: Conclusion

During the spring of 2016, Toni Morrison delivered the Norton Lecture Series at Harvard University. And, whether it's because I'm a witch in the sense of African spirituality, because there is some sort of god at work, or the mere fact that coincidences can be beautiful, too, this spring just happened to follow a year that I had devoted to studying the works of Toni Morrison in preparations for writing this thesis paper. When I discovered she was coming to Harvard, the university that I am studying under, and that, where others would have to put their names on a waiting list and pray for admission, I was guaranteed tickets from my thesis advisor, I couldn't help but think that the stars had aligned in my favor. And the privilege exceeded my expectations. Morrison's lectures: "Romancing Slavery", "Being and Becoming the Stranger," "The Color Fetish," "Configurations of Blackness," "Narrating the Other," and "The Foreigner's Home," delved into the harsh effects of slavery and racism in the United States. She illustrated how these concepts do not live in our past but prevail in our everyday lives to this very day. She discussed the power of words that classified and alienated black people throughout history. And she explored current event issues such as police brutality and the refugee crisis through fictional prose, as is her way.

Her lectures fell perfectly in line with all of her other texts. Morrison calls us to remember that we are all human and then she beckons us to relate to each

other. When I was reading Bouson's book in preparation for this paper, I came across a quote that perfectly captured the tone of Morrison's lectures this past spring, and of her work in general. Bouson said:

If the forceful emotional tug and pull of Morrison's novels, with their repeated enactments of shame-shame and shame-rage feeling traps, can unsettle or even vicariously shame and traumatize readers, who become enmeshed in narratives that focus on human brutality and the dis-ease of contemporary culture, readers...often are induced to assume a more comforting role dramatized in Morrison's novels: that of the understanding witness or the supportive community of listeners. (Bouson, 20)

As we read Morrison's work, even though we know it's fiction, we even hope it's fiction because it's so strange and often so difficult to read, but we also know that in more ways than not, it is true. The shame, the trauma, the brutality that her characters face are hardships that represent real experiences. Morrison takes us on journeys with her characters that make us face their painful or mysterious deaths, reminding us of the reality of our own. Her prose positions us to cheer for the protagonist's ability to reach out and forge connections with his or her friends. But, as Bouson points out, we, as readers, are still in the most comfortable position. We are the outsiders, the ones who see in but don't quite participate. We "witness", we "support", but we are not in.

Yet, we are simultaneously called by Morrison to take her message that death is not the end. Pure, animalistic survival is not that which measures our existence here. We are beyond that. In African culture, mythology recognizes that life is not linear, death is not the most powerful force that ends it all. Language and whether we do or don't relate to each other, choose to love each other, choose to share with each other, this agency is where the power lies. Morrison struggles to give us a raw

and untamed prophet of this message in the form of Sula. She revises this character, recognizing that the world may not be ready for a female like that so she gives us a soft, impressionable, pleasure-seeker with Milkman Dead. He learns that death is not the end and he forms a connection with his friend. But he does so in the very last line of the story and then there is nothing more. The sense of infinity is not quite captured. But then there is *Beloved*. And, here, Sethe realizes her humanity, brushes with death herself, inflicts death upon the person who she loves most in the world because she grasps that death is not always as bad as what life can hold. Then, Sethe uses storytelling, naming, and fusion with the community to build her identity and continue on a journey of self-explorative and healthy relationships with those around her. Morrison expresses, through *Beloved*, her argument about death's inferiority in the face of prevailing language.

For Toni Morrison, language, sharing, relating, is that which can give hope. As Bouson suggests, with each story that Morrison tells, which each relationship that she welds under duress, we as readers are being called to help as we witness. That, perhaps, in our witnessing of this fiction, we can, "help begin the process of healing shame and trauma by responding empathetically to the painful stories of Morrison's shame- and trauma-haunted characters." (20)

So, as I saw Toni Morrison, now age 85, pushed to the stage in a wheelchair, sipping water, breathing heavy into a microphone, ready to deliver a speech that she, by her own admission, would have to read directly because she cannot remember what happened yesterday, although she remembers fifty years ago in vivid detail, I could not help but feel more confident in my argument. Perhaps she

had become the old woman from the parable in her Nobel Speech. Perhaps I am the child taunting her, wanting to know if she can proclaim the bird in my hands as alive or dead. Perhaps the child is not only me but a whole mass of people with various occupations and nationalities and with various interests in world race dynamics. Or maybe the child is just everyone, period: Everyone who is afraid to die, afraid to do wrong in life, afraid connect to others. Maybe we're all the children and we're all just waiting, waiting with sly looks on our faces and chips on our shoulders, for someone to come along with a story, and tell us that the bird is in our hands.

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