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Psychological Intersexuals: Gender in the Novels of Toni Morrison

by

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ABSTRACT

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In *Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved, and Paradise*, Toni Morrison creates characters who cannot be neatly categorized as exclusively male or female. These “psychologically intersexed” characters claim their own agency to demolish male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, White/Black binaries. Morrison’s open-ended examination of gender roles leads her readers to see the “intersectional” forces behind our gender assumptions. Thus, by disrupting white heterosexual patriarchy, Morrison succeeds in her stated quest to “open a wider landscape” in American literature, allowing these bigendered characters the freedom to search for new identities and giving them a new language that more accurately reflects the authentic individuals they are striving to become.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In her essays and in interviews, Toni Morrison has expressed a desire to “open a wider landscape” in American literature by encouraging African-American writers to develop their own identity and find their own voice, separate from the hegemonic literary canon. This call to action is reflected in the way Morrison manipulates the traditional hero journey—as described by Joseph Campbell and others—to make it more accurately reflect the African-American experience. We can argue that the hero journey is symbolic of the most important journey any individual can make, that of discovering the self. Part of coming to an understanding of the self is reaching an understanding of one’s gender. Much of our current understanding of the formation of the individual and gender is based on a psychological tradition that began with Freud’s studies of “hysterical” females. However, white female feminists have long noted the problems with a psychology that they contend is oppressively patriarchal. Feminist theorists such as Flax and Chodorow have attempted to reassess Freud’s ideas within a feminist context. Unfortunately for African-Americans, much of our psychology today of individual development is based primarily on research that is both patriarchal and Eurocentric, a fact that could not have escaped Morrison’s notice. Patricia Hill Collins argues that understanding African-American notions of self and relationships “requires assessing the influence of Eurocentric gender ideology—particularly its emphasis on oppositional dichotomous sex roles” and warns against accepting “the prevailing sex/gender hierarchy . . . [which offers] the allegedly ‘normal’ gender ideology of white male and female sex roles as alternatives for the putatively ‘deviant’ Afrocentric ones” (184). To better understand the development of
a sense of self and a concept of gender within a more feminist, African-American context, we need to examine other current theories of the development of the self, considering in particular the theory set forth by Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* in which she argues that the development of the self must be accomplished within the dominant social order; however, that social order may be “disrupted” by a ritual repetition with a “failed copy.” We need to examine in what ways Morrison’s characters are in line with Butler’s theory and in what ways they deviate; if Morrison is indeed clearing the way for a “wider landscape,” we would expect to find some “disruptions” in this area. Of particular interest are the ways in which gender influences Morrison’s portrayal of the hero. I argue that Morrison plays with gender to create a new kind of hero, one that disrupts the hegemonic discourse by being neither male nor female. Are they the “disruptions” of which Butler speaks, or are these “bigendered” characters another category that defies easy classification?

To answer this question, we must first consider the standard theories concerning the development of the self, starting with Freud. Psychoanalysis was born when Sigmund Freud began to examine the development of femininity and masculinity in individuals. According to Freud, children mature through five distinct stages: oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital. During the oral stage (0-18 months), the infant’s libido focuses primarily on pleasure derived from the mouth; this is seen in its frequent nursing and sucking on various body parts. At 18-36 months, the child reaches the anal stage, when he or she first discovers the pleasure associated with eliminating and withholding elimination. Freud argued that at this stage, the child is learning to cope with the first pressures of parental demands (their desire to control the child’s elimination processes)
(Freud 589). In the Phallic stage (3-6 years), the child explores the pleasure derived from the genitals.

With the discovery of the genitals, Freud contends, comes the discovery of difference. In other words, a boy will first discover that he is a boy in that his body differs significantly from his mother’s, and a girl will discover that her body does not differ. At this point, the children get their introduction to notions of gender. When a boy notices that his penis makes him different from his mother, his first object of love and for whom he feels desire (the Oedipus complex), this absence of a penis in the mother will make the boy fear that one day he, too, may be castrated. The boy will take great pride in his penis and may perhaps scorn females, whom he has discovered are not like him. They become inferior “others.” To explain the lack of the penis in the mother, the boy may suspect that his father castrated his mother; since the boy has already discovered sexual sensations relating to the penis, he will fear that his father may do the same to him, especially when the father discovers he is his son’s rival for the mother’s affections. Castration will then be connected in the boy’s mind with threatened punishment for any sexual desires aimed at the mother. According to Freud, if the boy progresses “normally” through this stage, he enters the latency period, in which he will repress his sexual feelings for his mother and later transfer them to another female. At this stage, the boy, afraid of the father, will sublimate his desire for the mother into a desire to be like the father, to earn his approval.

When girls discover they have no penis, Freud contends, they fear they have been castrated or may hope that their clitoris will grow into a penis one day. According to Freud, “she is immediately prepared to recognize it [the penis] and soon becomes envious of the penis; this envy reaches its highest point in the consequently important wish that she
also should be a boy” (595). Seeing her mother’s “castration,” the girl may hold her mother in contempt and refuse her as an object of identification and identify instead with her father. Because of these ill feelings for the mother, Freud contends that “the development of sexual inhibitions (shame, loathing, sympathy, etc.) proceeds earlier and with less resistance in the little girl than in the little boy” (612). With both boys and girls, once their sexual feelings are repressed and redirected, children enter the latency stage, when sexuality is dormant and the children play mostly with others of the same gender. They then progress to the genital stage (puberty), when their sexual interests mature and they typically choose a mate of the opposite gender.

Freud also notes, however, that the distinction between the genders is not always clear cut. He points out that both male and female bodies manifest “a certain degree of anatomical hermaphroditism” and argues that because of this “there is an original predisposition to bisexuality, that in the course of development . . . changes to monosexuality, leaving only slight remnants of the stunted sex” (558). Freud asserts that sexual identity is unstable and that homosexuality is merely a form of “psychic hermaphroditism,” an “inversion” that is the result of “disturbances which are experienced by the sexual instinct during its development” (559).

Many theorists have utilized and transformed Freud’s ideas to develop their own ideas concerning the development of the self. One of Freud’s disciples, Jacques Lacan, theorized that we grow as children by making imaginary identifications and that we first get an inkling of our ego identity when we catch a glimpse of ourselves in a mirror. For Lacan, the second stage occurs when we use language, which is symbolic, to create our identities. Lacan argues that language uses a system of signs and symbols—the signifiers
and the signified—to prescribe meaning. Lacan notes, however, that this symbolic system can never truly claim to describe the “true” nature of the concept being expressed because the signification is constantly in flux, a never-ending process influenced by the society that produces it. Unfortunately, the signifier is more powerful than the signified (the subject), so the signified tends to “fade,” as into darkness, because of the castrating power of the phallocentric culture. For Lacan, the child gets his or her sense of gender by learning to follow the linguistic order/rules of the hegemonic culture. The child quickly learns that the culture demands a belief in difference (either/or) and that following that order will result in socialization. However, just as Freud argued that our subconscious functions at a symbolic level, Lacan contended that concepts such as “masculinity” and “femininity” are mere constructs formed by our use of language. Similarly, Lacan notes, as did Freud, that sexual identity is fluid; it can be “disrupted” by the unconscious.

Foucault, the French poststructuralist critic, also examines the ways in which language defines and controls gender and sexuality. Foucault disagrees with those who would argue that our culture attempts to repress its sexuality, pointing out that in fact our culture is fairly obsessed with sexuality. Foucault hypothesizes that this is so because sexuality is a field upon which power relations are played, becoming a “political ordering of life” (123). He urges us to examine “the expanding production of discourses on sex in the field of multiple and mobile power relations” (98). For Foucault, power is a process that occurs during struggles and confrontations; these conflicting forces transform and even reverse ideas, such as our conceptions of sexuality. These new conceptions quickly become embodied in law. However, Foucault warns, in order for power to be successful, “it [must] mask a substantial part of itself” (86). For example, Foucault argues that
medicine’s interest in controlling sexuality is the product of the power vacuum left when
the church lost its power over sexuality (41). Medicine was encouraged to do this by the
upper classes who saw the control of sexuality as “techniques for maximizing life,” which
affirmed the role of the upper classes (123). Deviations from these roles threaten the
status quo. We can see this, Foucault explains, in the way the law has traditionally treated
hermaphrodites: “for a long time hermaphrodites were criminals . . . since their anatomical
disposition, their very being, confounded the law that distinguished the sexes and
prescribed their union” (38). Once again, we see the notion of a fluid sexuality/gender
identification as a “disruption,” separate from the hegemonic definitions of “appropriate.”

White feminists looked at Freud’s theories to determine if they were too enmeshed
in the patriarchy to be useful. Luce Irigaray notes that Freud’s theory of the Oedipal
complex depends upon centering the male gaze as the “reality.” In other words, the
female does not exist except as a mutated mirror-image of the male. As she states, “The
contract, the collusion, between one sex/organ and the victory won by visual dominance
therefore leaves woman with her sexual void, with an ‘actual castration’ carried out in
actual fact. She has the option of a ‘neutral’ libido or of sustaining herself by ‘penis
envy’” (“Another ‘Cause’” 431). She scoffs at the notion that a little girl will be filled
with horror upon discovering her genitals differ from a boy’s, and especially at Freud’s
contention that this “desire [penis envy] will form the basis for ‘normal womanhood’”
(“Another ‘Cause’” 432). Irigaray suggests instead that the horror the male feels upon
seeing the female body is the horror of realizing a sexuality that is hidden and, therefore,
beyond his control: “Is it possible that the phobia aroused in man, and notably in Freud,
by the uncanny strangeness of the ‘nothing to be seen’ cannot tolerate her not having this
‘envy’? *Her* having other desires, of a different nature from *his* representation of the sexual and from his representations of sexual desire?” (“Another ‘Cause’” 433-44). Irigaray resists the notion of there being only “one sex/organ,” and, by extension, she rejects all notions of either/or thinking inscribed by the hegemonic society. She calls attention to the female anatomy, noting that the labia, composed of two separate lips that form the organ, symbolizes a more “feminine” view, declaring that woman “is neither one nor two. . . . She resists all adequate definition” (“This Sex” 365). She charges “the Oedipal interdiction . . . [with being] a somewhat categorical and factitious law;” noting “it does provide the means for perpetuating the authoritarian discourse of the fathers” (“This Sex” 365). She, too, notes the varied nature of sexuality, especially women’s: “her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural” (“This Sex” 366). For Irigaray, this open sexuality gives women the power to defy definition and to remain fluid; we must learn to listen to this nonpatriarchal language, she urges, by listening “with another ear, as if hearing an ‘other meaning’ always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them [emphasis in original]” (“This Sex” 366). If we insist on a one-sided, either/or view, we risk forcing women to see themselves fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess, what is left of a mirror invested by the (masculine) ‘subject’ to reflect himself, to copy himself. Moreover, the role of ‘femininity’ is prescribed by this masculine specular(ization) and corresponds scarcely at all to a woman’s desire, which may be recovered only in secret, in hiding, with anxiety and guilt. (“This Sex” 367).
However, Irigaray warns against simply trying to reverse the male gaze in order to make it totally female-centered; if women were totally to reject "heterosexual pleasure," they would simply once again be faced with a "disconnection from power that is traditionally theirs" ("This Sex" 368). In other words, they would continue to maintain an either/or economy, and "history would repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness: to phallocratism" ("This Sex" 369).

Social psychologist Nancy Chodorow also examines, from an altered Freudian stance, the way males and females form personality. Chodorow notes that Freud's penis envy theory revolves around the assumption that girls are traumatized by discovering they lack a penis. However, as she points out, "this traditional account violates a fundamental rule of psychoanalytic interpretation. When the analyst finds trauma, strong fears, or a conflict, it is a signal to look for the roots of such feelings. Because of his inability to focus on the preoedipal years and the relationship of mother to child, Freud could not follow his own rule here" (12). Chodorow rejects the notion of traumatic penis envy, suggesting instead that it is actually maleness which is "more conflictual and more problematic" because "a boy must learn his gender identity as being not-female, or not-mother" (13). Males develop their sense of masculinity in a world which elevates all things masculine. Therefore, they soon learn that anything associated with the feminine lacks value, leading them to repudiate the feminine and thereby declare their differentiation from the mother. This task of differentiation is not as difficult for females. Chodorow explains that although girls notice they are both like and unlike their mothers, because they base their model upon the mother, their core identity formation does not contradict their sense of selfhood. In short, boys assume a masculine identity by becoming "not-the-
mother" whereas girls must "reproduce mothering" to become females. Gender is not biological, according to Chodorow, and "gender differences, and the experience of difference . . . are socially and psychologically created and situated" (4). Chodorow contends that full differentiation requires "an emotional shift and a form of emotional growth" (including the ability not to "experience the Other solely in terms of its own needs for gratification and its own desires"); she also believes that those who are unable to grow this way tend to develop "arbitrary boundary creation and an assertion of hyperseparateness to reinforce a lack of security in a person’s sense of self as a separate person" (8). To remedy society's tendency to denigrate the feminine, Chodorow advocates "equal parenting as a necessary basic of sexual equality" (8).

Another Freudian-feminist critic, Jane Flax, disagrees with Chodorow's theory, arguing instead "that the development of women's core identity is threatened and impeded by an inability to differentiate from the mother" (23). Like Chodorow, she takes Freud to task for his inability to fully understand and explain the early infantile experience, a problem which she attributes to "his lack of direct clinical experience with children" (25). She also contends that he does not examine the mother's role in depth and ignores the effect the preoedipal period has on boys, focusing too much on the Oedipal and postoedipal periods (26-27). Flax notes that the current definition of "nature" is heavily based on Descartes' theory of the "cogito," a theory which argues that "the self is created and maintained by thought" (27), a notion she finds "particularly relevant for feminist analysis" since "the 'state of nature' seems to be primarily populated by adult, single males whose behavior is taken as constitutive of human nature and experience as a whole" (29).
What these variations of Freudian psychology share is a belief that the self is defined by the realization that there are others (the "Other") who are not the self. In other words, the self is defined by difference, creating an either/or dichotomy of thought, and this difference is first noted in gender. As feminists have noted, all too often, gender difference is equated with inferiority. Freudians and White feminists have concentrated on such questions as to whether the realization that there are others is traumatic, and if so, to which gender and to what degree. Feminists have long argued that any theory created by a specific segment of the population that tends to favor that population is suspect.

This notion is especially important to African-Americans, whose skin color has for centuries "othered" them from the Eurocentric hegemonic culture, and particularly to African-American women, who can be said to be doubly "othered" by virtue of being both Black and female. Consequently, many Black feminists feel estranged from the White feminists, who otherwise would be seen as allies in the struggle for equality. Although White feminists have rejected a long history of "research" which consistently argues that female behavior is deviant from the norm, a standard defined by masculine behavior, African-American feminists express a fear that their White sisters, by embracing Eurocentric theories, continue the tendency to judge African-Americans from White standards. This explains African-American's reluctance to embrace any psychological or sociological theory which originates from White theorists. In 1928, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski attacked the ethnocentrism of Freudian psychoanalysis, especially the Oedipus complex, which, he noted, "corresponds essentially to our patrilineal Aryan family with the developed patria potestas, buttressed by Roman law and Christian morals. . . . Yet this complex is assumed to exist in every savage or barbarous society. This
certainly cannot be correct” (qtd. in Walton 224). Hortense Spillers argues against the wholesale acceptance of Freudian theory, insisting that it seems that Freud wrote as if his man or woman was Everybody’s, were constitutive of the social order, and that coeval particularities carried little or no weight. . . . Precisely because its theories seduce us to want to concede, to give in to its seeming naturalness, its apparent rightness to the way we live, we must be on guard all the more against assimilating other cultural regimes to its modes of analysis too quickly, without question, if at all. (“All the Things” 138-39).

Spillers and others have good reason to be suspicious. The now-infamous Moynihan Report of 1965, which studied Black families in the United States, decreed that the legacy of slavery inverted the male/female roles in the family, creating a new, different family structure that was automatically perceived as being inferior to the one proposed by the White standard. As Collins notes, “Black family structures are seen as being deviant because they challenge the patriarchal assumptions underpinning the construct of the ideal ‘family.’ Moreover, the absence of Black patriarchy is used as evidence for Black cultural inferiority” (75). Collins explains that in order to establish difference and the supposed superiority that is the result of this either/or thinking, the Othered group—in this case, African Americans—must be objectified and stereotyped. Collins focuses on the stereotypes unique to Black women, two of the most prevalent being the mammy and the matriarch. She notes that these images are generated for the purpose of controlling the Black population, for they are “designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty appear to be natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life” (68). To counteract this tendency, Spillers urges African-American theorists to “unhook the psychoanalytic hermeneutic from
its rigorous curative framework and recover it in a free-floating realm of self-didactic possibility that might decentralize and disperse the knowing one” (“All the Things” 153). Freudian theory, based upon an either/or, me/not me stance, can be said to create a dichotomy of difference that can easily lend itself to objectification: “Objectification is central to this process of oppositional difference. In either/or dichotomous thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (Collins 69).

Whether or not one accepts these various Freudian theories of the development of the self, the dangers of Eurocentric patriarchal, dichotomous thinking are obvious. Unfortunately, the means to overcome these limitations are not. Some feminists have focused on fighting against the specific qualities assigned to the female gender, arguing that whatever perceived differences exist are mainly the result of social conditioning. Others have upheld the idea of difference and simply declared that “feminine” qualities are superior to “masculine” qualities; proponents of this idea urge men to become more like women. However, there is another approach to this problem. Instead of trying to establish clear definitions and boundaries for what constitutes “feminine” and “masculine” behavior, Judith Butler discusses a movement which denies the very existence of gender categories.

The existentialists, led by John Paul Sartre, viewed the “self” as the primary unit, always in struggle with the “Other.” Unlike the Freidians, the existentialists see the Other in the general culture rather than the specific mother-versus-Other dynamic. For Sartre, when individuals realize they are objects to be viewed by the Other, they are filled with existential anxiety. This process of defining the self is the only condition individuals
cannot escape; in fact, Sartre declares we are “doomed to freedom.” It is the duty of individuals to fight against this external definition; individuals must seek to be “authentic” by fighting to define themselves. For the existentialists, this fight is the act of “becoming” and is seen as a “journey,” an interior journey of self-determination, experienced/ performed equally by every individual. For Butler, this act of becoming is a struggle that is played within the system (the dominant social order). In her early work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that the social order is maintained through repetition which constructs meaning. Gender, then, becomes an “act,” one that requires a ritual repetition; the sheer weight of the repetition leads the culture to believe in the “naturalness” of the behavior. Those who refuse to participate in the ritual repetition of the established gender roles are punished by the dominant culture. For Butler, the only way individuals can successfully challenge the dominant culture is to subvert their identity by playing “within the practices of repetitive signifying” (*Gender Trouble* 145); however, within these repetitions we may discover disruptions, “failed copies.” The failed copies, the discontinuities, reveal the groundlessness of gender norms, allowing individuals to present an indirect yet sustainable challenge to the dominant culture. Butler points to the possibility of multiple identifications, claiming that power can never be escaped, only redeployed. *In Gender Trouble* Butler considers drag queens an example of these “failed copies,” disrupting the cultural hegemony with their ritual repetition vis-à-vis drag shows. However, in her later work, *Bodies That Matter*, Butler questions whether parodying the dominant norms is enough to displace them; indeed, whether the denaturalization of gender cannot be the very vehicle for a reconsolidation of hegemonic norms. . . . Drag may well be used in the service of
both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender
norms. . . . Drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative
structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes
heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality. (125)

In other words, Butler sees the danger inherent in trying to subvert a system by
utilizing elements of that system. As Audre Lourde proclaims, "The master's tools can
never be used to dismantle the master's house" (291). Where, then, can we look to find a
way to subvert gender norms? Butler notes that
gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as "internal" and "hidden," nor
is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be
traced as the play between psyche and appearance. . . . Further, this will be a 'play'
regulated by heterosexist constraints though not, for that reason, fully reducible to
them [emphasis in original]. (Bodies 234).

It is the area of gender in which this play is carried out, an area Homi K. Bhabha
refers to as the "interstitial existence." This becomes Morrison's arena of disruption. In
this interstitial space embedded within the hegemonic culture, new conceptions of gender
are played out, conceptions that resist the either/or dichotomies of male/female,
heterosexual/homosexual. In a similar fashion, Queer theorists call into question the very
definition of what constitutes "male" and "female," undermining the notion of "proper"
gender roles.

From a purely scientific standpoint, the parameters of gender identification are
surprisingly vague. This becomes painfully clear when one considers the issue of the
intersexed (hermaphrodites). The Intersex Society of North America argues that gender is
only a cultural construction. The society points out that “1/500 of the population have a karyotype [genetic marker] other than XX or XY. . . . Genitals develop from a common precursor, and therefore intermediate morphology is common, but the popular idea of ‘two sets’ of genitals (male and female) is not possible (ISNA website). Similar to the battle over self-definition fought by feminists and African-Americans, many intersexed individuals find themselves embroiled in a debate over how they should be perceived by the dominant culture. There is a movement to resist the standard older paradigm—seeing intersexed people as abnormal and in need of surgical intervention from infancy on. This paradigm insists on assigning the child a gender immediately upon birth and subjecting the infant to surgeries and medications in an attempt to force the body to reflect that particular gender. All too often, proponents of this approach merely guess at what the child’s gender most closely resembles. However, since even an examination of the individual’s DNA cannot always accurately determine gender, the new model for the consideration of intersexed individuals urges doctors to view the condition as a variation rather than abnormality; this psychology-centered model contends that doctors should encourage parents to let the child decide his or her own gender, avoiding surgeries which may permanently inhibit the individual from choosing which gender feels most comfortable. This would give the intersexed individuals a sense of agency by allowing for self-definition (Dreger “Notes on the Treatment” qtd. in ISNA website). This approach is viewed as radical by the majority of the medical community. Researchers Kessler and McKenna have noted “that the absence of any physical or behavioral ground for a dichotomous classification of men and women has led to the emergence of a new ‘scientific’ concern
with gender identity, the individual’s psychological sense of being a male or a female, as a
firmer foundation for a ‘fixed dichotomy’” (qtd. in Hawkesworth 676).

We can easily see the parallels between the intersex dispute and earlier efforts to
prove females and African-Americans inferior to the White male standard. The question
of whether gender is a psychological or physical state—or, perhaps, a combination of the
two—also echoes the similar question of the origin of sexual orientation. Fighting against
the cultural hegemony by demanding the right to self-definition, Queer theorists find
themselves arguing some of the same points as the feminists, both Black and White.

The gay rights movement has followed the same basic path as the feminist
movement and the civil rights movement. First, there was a push to prove that
homosexuals are not different from heterosexuals; the gay community recognized that it
was being “othered”; spokespeople for this position tried to appeal to the general public
by pointing out that many homosexuals behave just as heterosexuals except for their
choice in sexual partners (this approach is still alive today in such groups as the Log Cabin
Republicans). Next came the gay pride movement, a time when groups such as Queer
Nation formed, who challenged their inferior position in society by declaring, “We’re here!
We’re queer! We’re proud of it; get used to it!” Some in the lesbian community
embraced lesbian separatist thinking, propounded by leaders such as Andrea Dworkin,
who proclaimed that all heterosexual sex is rape; the only way women can stop being
abused is to become totally woman-centered, avoiding even the most casual contact with
males. At first, the heterosexual dominant culture recoiled in horror at these
developments in the gay rights movement, but gradually a modicum of acceptance began
to manifest, especially in the media. Science has contributed to a greater acceptance of
homosexuality by seeking to explain and thereby perhaps inadvertently legitimize homosexuality, exploring the nature/nurture debate over the origins of homosexuality. Nevertheless there still exist two segments of the gay community that continue to be shunned both by homosexuals and heterosexuals: the bisexual and transgender communities.

Many Queer theorists have documented the biphobia present in both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. Amanda Udis-Kessler, in “Identity/Politics,” notes that the bisexual movement was actually an offshoot of the lesbian feminist movement, “led by women—and surprisingly, many women who once identified as lesbian feminists” (53). In the 1970’s lesbian feminist movement, heterosexual women were seen as “suspect” because they were, in effect, sleeping with the enemy. As Udis-Kessler points out, even if these lesbians occasionally found themselves in bed with a man, they kept this secret. But these women felt the pressure of mainstream lesbian feminists who declared that bisexuality was merely a “desire to invade or infiltrate lesbian space” (Udis-Kessler 56). Similarly, Ault has argued that “negative sentiment toward bisexuality and bisexual women finds expression in a wide variety of forms of discrimination, erasure, invalidation, and prejudice in lesbian feminist communities and discourse” (204). In “Hegemonic Discourse,” Ault attempts to explain the reasoning embraced by biphobic people. One of the most prevalent is the lesbian feminist “either-you-are-with-us-or-against-us” mentality. Anything less than an either/or dichotomy is unacceptable. Ault enumerates the various methods employed by lesbians to “neutralize” bisexuality. One of the most interesting, in terms of Morrison’s works, is incorporation, an act that “acknowledges bisexual existence but denies its integrity by constructing bisexuals as
‘really either heterosexual or homosexual.’ This creates the presumption that those bisexuals who are ‘really lesbians’ will eventually experience enlightenment and thereby become legitimate [emphasis mine]’ (208). The use of incorporation “hinges on an essentialist and binary construction of sexual identity. In this discourse, sexual identity is constructed as bifurcated; subjects ‘are’ either heterosexual or homosexual” (209). Ault studied lesbian resistance to the bisexual community, noting that “lesbian discourse employs four identifiable strategies [in neutralizing bisexuality]: suppression, incorporation, marginalization, and delegitimation” (207)—the very same techniques that have been deployed against lesbians seeking agency. Why would the gay community be so vehement in its rejection of bisexual/transgendered people? An easy answer would be to argue that, unfortunately, oppressed people sometimes attempt to elevate themselves by finding another group they can oppress. Others defend their anti-bisexual stance by claiming that either bisexuals are gay turncoats, too afraid to proclaim their homosexuality, or “fence sitters,” too lazy to decide their orientation, people whose only fitting audience is the Jerry Springer show7. However, the depth of anger and disavowal displayed by the gay community suggests the problem lies deeper. Ault argues “the bisexual category carries with it the prospect of disrupting the sex/gender/sexuality system” (214). In other words, the standard division of sexuality into heterosexual/homosexual maintains a dichotomous point of view. By offering two opposite sides, the individual can align himself or herself with one side and feel part of that community. Ruth Goldman contends that “the concept of bisexuality could function to disrupt and further open a paradigm that depends on binary oppositions” (177). Interestingly, in language that clearly reflects Morrison’s statement about opening
literature up to a wider landscape, Goldman declares that “by expanding the ways that we think about queerness, we will also be opening up our theories to a wider audience” (179). The study of bisexuality and transgenderism is, in fact, expanding. In *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Anthology* (1996), ten of sixteen articles deal directly with bisexual/transgender issues. Bisexual/transgender theory is entering homosexual discourse:

Theorizing bisexuality as a valid epistemological site allows theorists to understand compulsory monosexuality’s role as an essential component of heterosexism, to move beyond dichotomized theories of mutual interiority, to strengthen theories attenuated through the denial of bisexuality. . . . On axes of race, class, gender, ability, and other categories of difference, the theorization of bisexuality as a subject position must nonetheless begin in order for emerging bisexual epistemologies to contribute to fuller, more accurate, theorization of sexuality” (James 218).

In short, bisexuality/transgenderism challenge the hegemonic notion of binary sexuality, and “since a belief in monosexuality and binary notions of gender are built into the very foundations of this society, the concept of bisexuality threatens the very structure of heteropatriarchy” (Goldman 177).

African-Americans have a long history of questioning binary systems. For years, many have worked to dispel the artificiality of the White/Black model, uncovering the roots of racial oppression. Unfortunately, all humans have discovered it is far easier to discern the faults of others/Others than our own. Not only the White hegemonic culture rejects homosexuality and bisexuality. Philip Harper’s *Are We Not Men* asserts that within
the African-American community, debates over African-American identity are, at heart, 
debates about masculinity; in other words, in order to be truly “black,” an African-
American man must fit Black definitions of masculinity. Collins notes, “African-
Americans have tried to ignore homophobia generally and have avoided serious analysis of 
homophobia within African-American communities” (193), asking, “Why have African-
American women been strangely silent on the issue of Black lesbianism?” and quoting 
Barbara Smith’s response: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black 
women have,” so “maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort” (194). Collins adds that 
another reason may be the tendency to view Black lesbians as “the ultimate other”; these 
“others” generate anxiety, discomfort, and a challenge to the dominant group’s control of 
power and sexuality on the interpersonal level” (194). Audre Lorde maintains some black 
women believe “black lesbians are a threat to black nationhood, are consorting with the 
enemy, are basically unblack” (290). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., discloses that many African-
Americans resent the fact that leaders of the gay rights movement have appropriated the 
arguments of the civil rights movement; these objectors tend to view the gay rights 
movement as “Liberace in Rosa Parks drag” (25). Prejudice against bisexuals is also 
evident in the African-American community. This attitude is quite evident in the writing 
of Cheryl Clarke, who reprimands bisexual women: “There is the woman who engages in 
sexual-emotional relationships with women and labels herself bisexual. (This is 
comparable to the Afro-American whose skin color indicates her mixed ancestry yet calls 
herself ‘mulatto’ rather than black.) [emphasis in original]” (244). Clarke equates a black 
woman’s bisexuality with denial of her blackness, a refusal to admit who she really is—a 
black woman and a lesbian. Thus Clarke, while trying to interrupt the hegemonic
discourse, actually upholds it by insisting upon the either/or categorization of heterosexual/homosexual. She urges her audience to become “liberated from the false premise of heterosexual superiority” only to establish a new homosexual superiority.

What, then, do these gender theories—especially those concerning bisexuality—have to do with Toni Morrison’s novels? Although Morrison may not have been consciously working out her novels within the particular framework of Queer theories, it is highly unlikely she would have been totally unaffected by these movements, especially when one considers Morrison’s interest in gender roles and in opposing the hegemony. Morrison does, in fact, incorporate some of the ideas found in the gay/lesbian discourse of the 70’s in each of her novels. In fact, she expands those ideas to create a new discourse on gender and race, a discourse which rejects all modes of binary thought.

As we have seen, Foucault and others have argued that gender is socially constructed. At times, Morrison seems to believe otherwise, but in an interview with Rosemarie K. Lester we can see her ambivalence: “My true feeling is that they [male attitudes] are inherent, though I’m perfectly willing to be persuaded that they are not, and I’ve read a lot of literature that suggest all of this business is obviously learned. . . . But I think that males—maleness—tends to be inherent. . . . But there is an idea, a concept, of masculinity which can be transferred, certainly [emphasis added]” (48). She bases her opinion on her first-hand experience of rearing two boys, noting she wasn’t “a good father—I was a good head-of-household. . . and then I discovered . . . that you can only be what you are, and deliver what you have, and that you can’t provide the other things” (47). Her words here suggest she has a clear idea of what a “father” is and sees it as diametrically opposed to what a “mother” is, avoiding the gender-neutral word “parent,”
which carries no gender-laden connotations. But again, even though she sometimes strongly argues for the innateness of gender, she immediately undermines her stance with her notion of gender transference; she acquiesces that her opinions are based on personal experience only and, in fact, go against current literature. By noting that she grew up in a home defined by rigid gender definitions and emphasizing she had no experience rearing females, she openly divulges her personal biases. In her personal life as well as her literary life, Morrison acknowledges the “blurred edges” of this controversy. In her novels, especially the later ones, she embraces those blurred edges and transcends the either/or straight/gay, male/female, Black/White dichotomies by presenting characters who might more aptly be call “psychologically intersexed.” Whereas *Tarbaby* features characters who work hard to uphold the socially acceptable standards of male and female behavior, Morrison’s *Sula, Song of Solomon, Beloved,* and *Paradise* all feature characters whose psychological sense of self and behaviors cannot be neatly categorized as either exclusively male or female. These characters—Sula, Milkman and Pilate, Sethe and Paul D, and Patricia and Consolata—resist the mandate of Black and White communities to suppress their ambiguities and play the narrow, culturally-approved roles assigned them.

Morrison’s psychologically intersexed characters go beyond the limited act of cultural defiance seen in Butler’s drag queens, whose defiance is incomplete because it leaves unquestioned clearly-defined roles of proper “masculine” and “feminine” behavior. Just as intersexuals “object to having been adapted to fit one of two ‘standard models’ for the sexual body that are based on the heterosexual default” (Turner 459), Morrison’s psychologically intersexed characters object to the heterosexual, White default used to proscribe their standard models. To counteract the hegemonic culture’s desire to foist a
choice on intersexuals by subjecting them to a barrage of medical interventions from birth, intersexuals are now demanding to be able to choose for themselves, for “claiming choice is, consciously or not, a way to refuse to place oneself into the homosexual/heterosexual binary. It is a wedge that disrupts one of the most powerful concepts structuring sexuality in the modern West” (Whisman qtd. in Turner 459). Likewise, by creating gender-bending, psychologically intersexed characters who claim their own agency and thereby demolish the male/female, homosexual/heterosexual and White/Black binaries, Morrison disrupts White heterosexual patriarchy and does indeed succeed in her quest to “open a wider landscape” in American literature.

1 Many Black feminists have lamented this double burden. See, for example, Frances Beale’s “Double Jeopardy,” Valerie Smith’s “Black Feminist Theory,” and Elizabeth Abel’s “Black Writing.”

2 For a consideration of how these narrow roles also negatively impact men, see Susan Faludi’s Stiffed.

3 In fact, the ISNA notes that at least one woman who was disqualified from the Olympics after genetic testing proved she was not female gave birth to a healthy child.

4 Ruth Goldman notes that “Queer theory operates from the perspective that heterosexuality, or ‘normative’ sexuality, could not exist without queer, or ‘anti-normative’ sexualities. That is, that which is not normal works to define the normal” (169).

5 Note the popularity of the situation-comedy Will and Grace, which has a gay male lead, and the increasing number of actors who have “come out” without destroying their careers.

6 Once the boundaries of gender are removed, the boundaries of sexual orientation also become blurred. This becomes obvious when one considers what medical science offers to individuals who feel their body’s gender does not mirror their psychological gender. If a male feels as though he has a woman’s psychology, the surgeons are more than happy to alter his body through drug therapies and surgery to make that body and mind better aligned. However, if this “previously male” individual sexually desires other men, is he then homosexual?

7 Ironically, this latter view suggests that sexual orientation is in fact a matter of preference, a notion which many in the gay community are fighting via the scientific community’s study of the role of genetics and orientation.
CHAPTER 2

"Girls Together":

Achieving Gender Agency Via “Tomboy Resistance” in Sula

In Sula, Toni Morrison challenges the assumptions upon which many of our beliefs concerning gender are built, especially the notion that gender identification is innate, positioned at birth, and unchangeable. As mentioned before, many psychological theorists have attempted to examine and question this model. In the article “Tomboy Resistance and Conformity: Agency in Social Psychological Gender Theory,” C. Lynn Carr asserts that too many gender identity theories (Chodorow’s, for example) uphold these assumptions without clinical proof. Carr contends that the assumption that girls identify with their mothers and the female role in general is flawed because it does not adequately explain why girls consistently seek to identify with a gender traditionally accorded little respect or why sons repeatedly choose the masculine even when no father is present. The problem with these gender theories, she argues, is that they hinge upon an essentialist, biological ideology, assuming that all children passively accept socialization and notions about “correct” gender behavior. Using her research on self-identified tomboys, Carr argues that children are, in fact, social agents, capable of making conscious decisions concerning which ideas about gender to accept or reject. Carr points out that girls are labeled “tomboys” when they are not conforming to hegemonic notions of what “proper” feminine behavior is. Because of this, “the tomboy is associated with both the subversion of gender roles and the perpetuation of an oppressive, dichotomous gender system” (531). Carr contends that “tomboy narratives, because of their marked and ambiguous nature, should highlight gendered identificatory agency” (532). I would argue that Sula is, in fact,
a novel centering on two tomboy narratives—Nel’s and Sula’s. In *Sula*, Morrison shows us the girls’ strong sense of agency in their personality development and the great costs incurred when someone either totally relinquishes her agency, succumbing to the socially acceptable notions of “correct” gendered behavior or, conversely, maintains her agency, tenaciously clinging to the “incorrect” behaviors in spite of total opposition from her community.

Carr reports that the self-identified “tomboy” adult female participants in her study consistently shared elements of several themes. One theme is a dislike for feminine pursuits and a preference for masculine ones. In particular, as children, these women noted the many advantages of being male. Another theme is a rejection of feminine roles and role models. Carr discovered that the girls frequently experienced some or all of four moments: “rejection of femininity, choice of masculinity, active resistance, and active conformity” (535). She points out, however, that these moments are not an ordered progression; the girls often move back and forth within these moments and experience them to different degrees. Nel and Sula illuminate this fluid, back-and-forth movement as they mature in the course of the novel. As Deborah McDowell notes, the story’s narrative “denies the whole notion of character as static essence. . . . The self is multiple, fluid, relational, and in a perpetual state of becoming” (81).

The two girls are reared in the small, tightly-knit, insular black community of Medallion. In general, the smaller a community, the more familiar the members are with the rules that maintain the status quo and the more control the community attempts to exert on its members to maintain that status quo. One area a hegemonic culture almost always concerns itself with is gender roles. Although these roles may vary from culture to
culture, most members of a particular community will have a fairly clear idea of what type of gendered behavior is expected of them. In Medallion, the small town in which Morrison’s protagonists, Nel and Sula, grow up, women are expected to be passive, church-going child-bearers; men are supposed to be emotionally restrained money-earners. Nel and Sula, however, experiment with their gender identification when they are young. They do this in a way that could be labeled “tomboyish”; in other words, they assume some of the characteristics traditionally associated with boys. Although Nel ultimately succumbs to the feminine role, Sula never “grows out of” her tomboy stage and therefore becomes a major threat to her community. By doing so, however, Sula is able to stretch the limits of acceptance in the community and point Nel toward a different way of perceiving her role in a community that seeks to undermine any aberrations it feels threatens the status quo.

Nel is born into an aspiring middle-class family. Her mother, Helene, has done all she can to distance herself from her own mother, a prostitute in New Orleans. She has cultivated a respectable reputation in Medallion with her “heavy hair in a bun, [and] dark eyes arched in a perpetual query about other people’s manners” (18). Our narrator notes that not only is Helene an active churchwoman in the town’s most conservative church, she actually “held sway” (18). The bastion of middle-class respectability in Medallion, Helene takes great pleasure in controlling the lives of her husband and daughter. She embraces her duty to inculcate Nel with the proper respect for what Helene perceives as the community’s conventions of race, class, and gender. For example, Helene forces Nel to wear a clothespin on her nose so that it will not be broader than what Helene feels is “proper” for a girl of her standing. Her insistence on following the stereotypical white
standard of beauty is not unlike Geraldine’s desire (in *The Bluest Eye*) to model herself on the elusive white standards of beauty and correctness. Of women like this, Morrison has lamented, “There is a new, capitalistic, Modern American black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration. . . . I think there is some danger in the result of that production. It cannot replace certain essentials from the past” (qtd. in Ruas 105). Morrison is dismayed with individuals who would reject their own rich, worthy black culture for the white hegemonic culture’s values; in general, Morrison’s characters who pursue this self-destructive goal lead sterile, unfulfilling lives.

In spite of Nel’s conservative mother, Morrison quickly makes Nel’s sense of agency clear through her relationship with Sula. That the two girls are friends at all is indicative of defiance on Nel’s part. Helene at first forbade her to play with the wild offspring of the “sooty” Pease women², fearing, perhaps, the Wright reputation would be sullied by association. But Nel persists, and Sula’s quiet ways while she is in the Wright house quickly assuage Helene’s fears that some of her roughness might rub off on her daughter. Perhaps Helene relents because she is conscious of her own questionable—and well-hidden—past as the daughter of a New Orleans prostitute. After all, if Helene were able to so completely leave that aspect of her life behind, would it not be safe to assume her own daughter might avoid the tarnish of Sula’s family’s reputation? Nel’s decision to consciously disobey her mother is another example of her ability to be an agent in her own character formation. Her choice of the “wild” Sula as her playmate also suggests Nel’s desire to stretch the limits of the “ladylike” behavior her mother expects her to exhibit. Although Sula may outwardly conform to Helene’s definition of proper behavior when she
is sitting inside Helene’s home, when the girls leave that specific location, their behavior is far less conforming.

However, even before Nel begins to play with Sula, we see some early signs of Nel’s dissatisfaction with the prim, excessively “proper” role her mother expects her to play. On the train ride to her grandmother’s funeral, Nel has her first opportunity to see her mother outside her community, to see her through the eyes of others who do not automatically afford her the respect she has attempted to command in Medallion. This opportunity proves disastrous to Helene’s attempts to control her daughter. Nel sees her mother flash a smile at the abusive conductor who has just told her to “git [her] butt on in” to the colored coach, a submissive smile that reminds her of “a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before” (21), and is then sickened to see the effect of that fateful smile on the black soldiers in the colored coach. Nel sees that they “were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile” (22). Nel is ashamed of her mother’s weakness and views her now as “custard,” insubstantial and unworthy of respect.

This incident gives Nel the strength to rebel against her mother’s narrow-minded middle-class values and strictures. Carr points out that “tomboys often attributed weakness to their mothers. . . . [They are] not able to relate to their mothers as role models because they viewed them as victims, submitting to men” (538). Seeing her mother as weak and somewhat foolish, Nel promises herself that she will do all she can to reject the “custard” that may be lurking inside herself.
When they arrive at the great-grandmother's house, Nel is shocked to meet her grandmother for the first time. Much to Helene's annoyance, Nel is immediately attracted to the woman's canary-yellow dress and quick, unconcerned manner. Helene, like her grandmother, had sought to put as much distance between herself and this prostitute mother as possible; Nel's rebellious instincts immediately sense Helene's discomfort, further reason, perhaps, to be fascinated with the forbidden woman.

Seeing her mother through the eyes of strangers and meeting the exotic grandmother profoundly affects Nel's world view, for when Nel and her mother return home from the trip, Nel realizes that a change has taken place within herself. She looks in the mirror, seeing "the nose her mother hated" (28) but still is able to declare, "I'm me. . . . Me". . . . Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (28). Nel has not been passively absorbing the beliefs her mother is trying to foist upon her; when Nel is able to separate herself from her mother and begin to imagine another woman on whom to pattern herself, we see an example of what Carr calls active resistance to achieve agency. Morrison shows us that individuals—even young ones—are capable of making conscious, well thought-out decisions concerning what belief systems they will or will not embrace. Nel is a character in process, a process over which she exerts some measure of control.

However, rejection of one's mother is not enough to categorize a young girl as a tomboy. Carr points out that sometimes tomboys reject their mothers because they are really rejecting their mother's limited lifestyle choices. Nel finds the neatness of her mother's home "oppressive," and it fills her with "dread" (29). After her trip, however, empowered with her new way of seeing herself, Nel decides that she will leave her
mother’s small world and take off on her own to become a world traveler; “leaving Medallion would be her goal” (29). From this, we can see that Nel has taken her specific dissatisfaction with her mother and has enlarged it to include mother’s role in her community. She then further expands this dissatisfaction, applying it to her feelings for the community that produced her mother, the culture that imposes the narrow definitions of correct behavior (including gender prescriptions). Nel wants to distance herself from her community and pattern herself within a more masculine framework; it is interesting to note that unlike her “stay-put” mother, Nel’s father is a ship’s cook on the Great Lakes line, “in port only three days out of every sixteen” (17). In other words, Nel’s wanderlust is based upon her father’s example. Perhaps it is because her father is constantly absent that Nel feels no strong impetus to reject him; it is far easier to find the faults of those near to us. Her rejection of the feminine and acceptance of the masculine, as tentative as it may be at this point, suggests that Nel is beginning to refuse the social norms of her community and is becoming an agent in her own development, just as Sula is in hers.

Sula’s agency is also manifested in her choice of Nel as best friend. Although she has not been forbidden to play with Nel (it’s unlikely that her mother, Hannah, would forbid her much of anything, for Morrison portrays Hannah as being a rather nonchalant, “laissez-faire” parent), the fact that she chooses someone who comes from a family so diametrically opposed to her own suggests a kind of defiance. Sula’s family is living in a woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions, where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for
hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva
handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (29)

Sula’s mother and grandmother show little interest in upholding the middle- and
upper-classes’ standards of housekeeping, standards that traditionally are maintained by
“the lady of the house” or her servants. Nel loves to visit Sula’s house, a house whose
lack of cleaning and order might be classified as “masculine”—the stereotypical bachelor’s
residence. Certainly Nel is aware of the enormous amount of energy her mother must
daily expend to maintain her immaculate, sterile house, the responsibility for a clean house
traditionally falls solely upon the women. Her desire to be at Sula’s home is a rejection of
the role of housewife. One might expect the rebellious Sula to scorn Nel’s oppressively
tidy home; however, Sula “loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty
minutes at a time—still as dawn” (29). The reason for this is not immediately clear.
However, psychologists have argued that because children lack the maturity to exercise
complete self-control, they must look to their parents to exert external control over them;
parents who do not do this can create anxiety in their children, who will become terrified
when they discover that no matter how hard they push the boundaries and create chaos,
their parents will not intervene. Perhaps the clearly-cut boundaries of Nel’s home allow
Sula the opportunity to feel secure and maintain a meditative silence in their home.
Therefore, the two girls’ friendship is based, at least in part, on a rejection of their mothers
and their mothers’ ways. As the narrator points out, the girls realize “that they were
neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, [so] they
... set about creating something else to be” (52). This “something else to be” is neither
totally feminine nor totally masculine; the two girls create an identity somewhere in-
between the two polarized offerings, leaning, however, more towards the masculine than their community would prefer. The differences between the two create a dialectal tension which keeps either girl’s identity from subsuming the other’s.

Sula’s rejection of her mother becomes clarified after she is herself rejected by Hannah. Hannah and two friends are discussing the trials of being mothers. Sula walks by, unnoticed, while the women are alternately praising and bemoaning their offspring. Unfortunately, Sula is present when her mother makes a comment that shocks and deeply hurts her: “I love Sula. I just don’t like her” (57). Young Sula cannot put into a proper context what her mother was really saying, a comment which to Hannah and her friends is harmless, as is evidenced by her friend’s casual reply, “Guess so. Likin’ them is another thing” (57). She is devastated by what she perceives is a rejection of her. Carrying this pain of rejection with her, Sula and Nel meet and go off exploring, an exploration which leads them to one of the most chilling episodes in the novel, the drowning of Chicken Little.

The scene immediately preceding the death of Chicken Little is extremely important in terms of understanding the girls’ increasing sense of agency in rejecting socially-acceptable gender patterns. First, after Sula hears her mother’s fateful pronouncement, the girls leave the strictures of the home/community and retreat to the woods, away from the world of the adults. In the woods, the girls relish the “sense of wildness that had come upon them so suddenly” (58). As they lie in the grass, they begin to notice the pleasant sensations of their newly-developing bodies, especially their breasts. They then begin to participate in a strange kind of play. Nel initiates the sexualized play by stroking grass blades in a way that suggests masturbation, either masculine or feminine.
Next, "Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one, too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth" (58). Both the grass blades and the sticks can be viewed as phallic; the girls' manipulation of them suggests their mastery of the phallic. In fact, the stripping away of the bark on the twig to its "creamy innocence" is closely linked in the novel to Ajax's "cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled" (the narrator, in fact, tells us the twigs are "undressed" [58]) and later, to Sula's desire to take her grandmother's paring knife to peel away the skin layers of "the man whose lemon-yellow gabardines had been the first sexual excitement she'd known" (130), to get to the "loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs [emphasis added]" (130). The girls are in control of this image of masculinity. This dovetails neatly with Carr's research, for she notes that many of the tomboy narratives include the participants' awareness in their youth that the penis is the identifier by which their roles are decreed; at least one of the study's participants made her own "penis" and played with it in an attempt to have the freedom that boys have. Next, Nel begins to poke her "twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup" (58). The hole is suggestive of a vagina, so the girls are mimicking heterosexual copulation in their play.³ However, Morrison quickly complicates this reading, for the narrator tells us that "together they worked until the two holes were one and the same" (58). The girls' merging of the two holes with the twigs grinding away in them carries
lesbian overtones. This reading of the passage would seem to suggest an anti-homosexual theme in the next sentences:

When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel’s twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. Nel saw a bottle cap and tossed it in as well. Each then looked around for more debris to throw into the hole: paper, bits of glass, butts of cigarettes, until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there. Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass.

(58-59)

Some might contend this passage symbolizes the girls’ hatred of the feminine. However, I would suggest another possibility. First, by making holes with the twigs, the girls combine and control both the masculine and feminine. Their commingling and subsequent “trashing” of the holes and twigs, therefore, is not an attempt to denigrate the feminine; it is suggestive of their rejection of the male/female dichotomy proffered them by their culture. Symbolically, they “kill” this false “either/or” choice by giving it a “grave.” This grave foreshadows another grave, that of Chicken Little, the young boy who, by sheer bad luck, passes by the girls while they are still experiencing “restlessness and agitation” (59). It is important to note that it is Nel, not Sula, who has been leading this play. Many critics tend to describe Nel in typically passive, feminine terms and Sula in aggressive, masculine ones, but throughout the story ample evidence suggests that Nel is in fact an active participant in the making of the relationship and that it is she who controls the relationship. Although the young Nel may outwardly seem more feminine and passive than Sula, a closer inspection proves otherwise. This blending of masculine behavior in a
“feminine” package is yet another disruption of gender expectations, apparently one so subtle that Nel’s community (and many readers) have overlooked it. Since most people perceive only two choices in gender, masculine or feminine, they may perceive only two choices: wholehearted acceptance or rejection of one’s gender role. At least one other option is possible, and that is to outwardly conform but inwardly rebel. This is the option Nel chooses in her girlhood. Sula chooses open rebellion, but it is possible to argue that her outer rebellion masks an inward compliance. This inward compliance is hinted at in her early treatment of Chicken Little.

Sula, looking for excitement, decides to help Chicken Little climb a tree. One of the most often-repeated icons of tomboy behavior is the depiction of girls climbing trees. Perhaps tree climbing symbolizes tomboys because trees can be viewed as phallic symbols (later in the novel, Sula, on top of Ajax while they are having sex, is described as “a Georgia pine on its knees” [129]). And, as Carr points out, some tomboys report remembering a desire to be a boy in order to enjoy the power that boys enjoy; “a few linked this specifically to the penis” (540). However, once again, Morrison blends the masculine with the feminine. Climbing up the tree/mastering the phallus symbolically empowers Sula. Sula, however, in turn encourages and aids Chicken Little in a traditionally feminine way: “she followed the boy, steadying him, when he needed it, with her hand and her reassuring voice” (61). In other words, although Sula is outwardly rejecting the notion that nice little girls don’t climb trees (in fact, Morrison has already told us that the girls are wearing dresses, which would make her actions doubly forbidden; allowing one’s underwear to be seen is a transgression against “ladylike” behavior5), her nurturing treatment of the small child suggests maternal urges—something Sula believes
her own mother did not feel. Sula, still stinging with the pain of hearing her mother did not "like" her, is trying to give to Chicken Little what she feels her mother denies her, maternal concern. She is also displaying a desire to comply with the traditional role girls are expected to play after they mature and become mothers. Once at the top, Sula shows the boy the exceptional vantage point the tree offers. This shared journey to the scary heights of the tree also empowers him. "Chicken was still elated. 'I was way up there, wasn't I? Wasn't I? I'm a tell my brovver'" (60). After they return to the ground, Sula begins to swing the boy in a circle, but whether she lets go or he slips is never made clear. That Chicken Little dies, however, is made abundantly clear to the girls as soon as he fails to "come back up, laughing," as they expected (61).

Sula's killing of the boy can be viewed as an act of jealousy; she must find it appalling that even a silly, ignorant little boy like Chicken Little garners much more attention than any female would, no matter how bright and brave she might be.\(^6\) However, Sula's actions here also need to be viewed in terms of the event that immediately preceded this one, her perceived rejection by her mother. Although Hannah was complaining about the difficulties of rearing children, she was not rebelling against being a woman who brought children into the world. The death of Chicken Little, however, can be seen as the embodiment of Sula's ambivalent feelings. She is angry at her mother for not nurturing her. Her brief encounter with Chicken Little in the tree proves to Sula that she herself is capable of playing the role of nurturer; she did manage to get the terrified child to climb the tree and even relish the experience. Immediately after proving herself superior to her mother, Sula drowns the innocent child. The water, of course, is traditionally a symbol of birth, and this scene suggests a rebirth, a new Sula who, by killing
the child, symbolically kills the innocent child within herself, the one who needs her
mother’s approval, and replaces the loss with a Sula who can “outmother” the mother.
Sula can safely reject the maternal role now that she has proved herself capable of filling it.
However, we also have an inverted birth, for Sula and the water take a life; by throwing
the child into the water (thrusting the baby back into the womb), Sula transforms birth into
death. Sula recognizes the relationship between needing love and providing it and
symbolically rejects both urges, retaliating against her mother’s inability to fulfill all her
emotional needs by refusing to accept her mother and her mother’s role in society as
childbearer, subverting motherhood, even though, as the previous passage suggested, she
is quite capable of playing the role of nurturer.

The girls’ reactions to the death are once again indicative of the inversions of their
relationship. As mentioned before, although many tend to view Sula as the instigator in
the relationship, Nel is the one who immediately decides their course of action and attends
to the important details that might implicate them in the death. When Sula returns from
Shadrack’s house to see if he had witnessed their actions, she breaks into tears, and “Nel
quiet[s] her. ‘Sh, sh. Don’t, don’t. You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault. Sh. Sh.
Come on, le’s go, Sula. Come on now. Was he there? Did he see? Where’s the belt to
your dress?’” (62-63). Sula is reacting emotionally to the event, but Nel distances herself
from Sula’s feelings and her own by concentrating on the details of concealment,
behaviors traditionally associated with the masculine. At the funeral, the girls feel, for
perhaps the first time, “a space, a separateness, between them” (64). Although Nel is
absorbed with worrying about whether they will be caught (once again, a thought process
that traditionally is associated with masculine behavior) and struggling with defining her
own responsibility in his death—“Although she knew she had ‘done nothing,’ she felt convicted and hanged right there in the pew”—“Sula simply cried” (65) in an emotional, “feminine” way.

The novel then jumps from the death of Chicken Little to Hannah’s death and then immediately to Nel’s marriage to Jude. We do not witness the girls growing up together; for the majority of the novel, they are adult women. Their friendship is threatened by the marriage, for now, Nel is expected to lavish her attention on her husband, not her best friend. That Nel decides to “settle down” and marry is not out of character with being a tomboy. The terms “tomboy” and “heterosexual” are not mutually exclusive, for, as Carr points out, although “resistance to femininity was a common theme among tomboy informants, so were attempts to conform to gender expectations” (544). In fact, the narrator tells us that when Jude first broached the notion of marriage to Nel, “she seemed receptive but hardly anxious” (82). However, after being repeatedly frustrated by his lack of ability to find a job, Jude’s “rage and determination to take on a man’s role anyhow . . . made him press Nel about settling down. . . . He chose the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest” (82-83). Nel’s reluctance to marry is noteworthy because it is the antithesis of everything her mother and her community have told her about what she should be desiring. Nel, of course, tends to conform outwardly, so her marriage to Jude could be viewed as merely another example of this behavior. Still, Nel’s ambivalence concerning marriage is obvious, and this ambivalence is further echoed—and magnified—in Sula.

Sula continues to be the one who openly defies her society’s definition of what a woman should be and do. If Nel outwardly succumbs to her society’s demands that she
marry and settle down, Sula never does. Perhaps Sula’s continued resistance is the consequence of having two fiercely independent role models who themselves refused to conform to social expectations and rarely attempted to control and mold Sula’s development. However, like Sula, Eva and Hannah practice a sort of outward rebellion/inward acceptance of their community’s norms. Although their community disapproves of certain aspects of their lifestyle, on the whole, the two women are accorded a place within the community. In fact, the narrator notes that the women whose husbands have slept with Hannah actually feel flattered that she would find their mates so attractive and don’t feel particularly threatened by Hannah because she shows no interest in maintaining long-term relationships with the men. Hannah is even respected by the men she seduces, for the “never gossiped about her . . . [and defended] her and protect[ed] her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill” (45). The community’s reluctance to interfere with the Peace women suggests that the two are begrudgingly given a place within the community.

When Nel marries, however, Sula establishes a “clean break” with her community by leaving it. On the day of Nel’s wedding, after the reception, Sula disappears for ten years, apparently to go to college and travel. She leaves no way for her best friend to contact her during her absence. Sula is reacting strongly to her friend’s marriage. The narrator assures us that for Nel, “Sula made the enjoyment of [Jude’s] attentions keener simply because she seemed always to want Nel to shine. They never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or competed against each other for them” (83-84); in other words, Nel believes that Sula is supportive of Nel’s relationship with Jude. However, Sula’s abrupt departure from Medallion and her best friend’s life suggests that
she may not be altogether happy with Nel’s marriage. Perhaps Sula views Nel’s kisses to Jude as a kind of “Jude/Judas kiss” to the women’s relationship, a betrayal of their friendship. Sula’s unannounced departure and subsequent lack of contact with Nel is an unusually extreme behavior, more consistent with the actions of a spurned lover than a best friend. Quite possibly, Sula leaves so she can pre-empt the necessary rejection of her position as number one in Nel’s life. Now that Nel is assuming the role of newlywed and “good wife,” her friendships with other women will need to become secondary to the community-approved relationship with her husband. Perhaps by leaving, Sula rejects Nel before Nel has the chance to reject Sula by undermining the previous intimacy and primacy of their relationship.

When Sula returns from her self-imposed exile, she makes it clear to her community that she is not a part of it, nor does she wish to be. Bereft of her best friend, Sula becomes a dangerous presence in the town. Away from the controlling powers of her community for several years, Sula has jettisoned any of the restraints that at one time may have softened her rejection of the community’s standards. Sula now transgresses with impunity. For example, Sula’s first action upon her return is to verbally attack her grandmother. She begins by informing Eva that she does not feel indebted to her for anything. When Eva asks Sula, “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you down” (92), Sula’s answer is telling: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Bouson notes that Sula’s “shameless” sexuality and refusal of the maternal has made her a “feminist heroine” to some, but as this view originates from a “white, middle-class perspective, [it] becomes complicated when told through a black perspective, and, thus in Morrison’s novel, the drama of gender
identity is also race-inflected” (47). By rejecting acceptable standards of sexuality and motherhood, Sula simultaneously refuses the play the roles of “good girl” and “good black girl.” Sula’s refusal of motherhood infuriates Eva, even though she herself was a woman who had “made herself” after her husband deserted her and her three young children. Eva has conformed to at least some of her community’s expectations, so she is angered when Sula refuses to do likewise. She declares Sula to be “selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (92). Sula replies that Eva and her daughter Hannah were also guilty of that particular sin, but Eva’s defense is that they were not husbandless by choice. We might argue, of course, that Eva easily could have remarried, especially when we consider the hordes of men who visited her and admired her one beautiful leg; however, having her husband leave her has given Eva the excuse to remain single and thereby outwardly conform to her community’s demands that a woman be with a man (as does Hannah’s husband’s death). Sula, nonetheless, discerns the hypocrisy in Eva’s demands on her and refuses to give in to them. Sula continues her attack by letting Eva know she is certain that Eva murdered Plum. She then threatens to treat Eva the same way Eva had treated Plum. Although Sula does not, in fact, attempt to hurt Eva, she does something else which shocks the community and further distances her from them: she puts Eva in a run-down retirement home run by white people. She is rejecting the Medallion community’s unwritten decree that nice girls stay at home and tend to their ill parents. Morrison notes that although the community could begrudgingly tolerate Sula’s sexual independence, she commits an unforgivable crime upon her grandmother: “Sula did the one terrible thing for black people which was to put her grandmother in an old folks’ home, which was outrageous, you know. You take care of people! So that would be her
terrible thing [emphasis in original]” (qtd. in Stepto 16). Although Eva seems shocked by Sula’s refusal to “mother the mother,” Hortense Spillers reminds us that Sula’s “moral shape . . . does not come unprecedented or autonomously derived. Merging Eva’s arrogance on the one hand and Hannah’s self-indulgence on the other” (47), Sula becomes the self-centered iconoclast who rejects the maternal. Although it is possible that the anger she felt towards her mother for not declaring her love is now being projected onto her grandmother, it is probable that putting Eva in the old folks’ home exemplifies Sula’s refusal to “do pretty” and adopt the maternal role expected of her. This possibility is strengthened when one considers that several of the women who identified as tomboys in Carr’s study reported feeling great resentment when they were expected to “mother their moms” even though they had not reported having particularly hostile relationships with their mothers (538). Sula’s actions here certainly suggest a high level of resentment, and she quickly points out Eva’s hypocrisy in demanding that Sula mother her, as Eva herself has transgressed against the maternal by murdering her own son. However, although race was not necessarily a major factor taken into consideration in the tomboy research, it is, of course, vitally important to Morrison. Sula’s rejection of the maternal can be viewed as a refusal to succumb to the pressure to play within a narrow range of acceptable roles in an effort to undermine racist stereotypes. In a discussion of Sula’s character, Bouson describes hooks’ assertion (in “Ain’t I a Woman?”) that many black women became involved in the “cult of true womanhood” to counteract the racist assumption that African-Americans did not care about their children (70). Bouson notes that Sula’s rejection of the maternal can therefore be viewed as “undermining the middle-class
idealization of motherhood” (53). By resisting maternity, Sula undercuts both racist and genderist assumptions.

For Nel, Sula’s return is at first a joyful occasion. She has not found marriage to be particularly rewarding, for during her marriage to Jude, the “years had spun a steady gray web around her heart” (95), a web Morrison uses in the novel to suggest emotional shutdown. Nel has learned the danger of allowing herself outwardly to conform to her community’s expectations, for she has paid a high price for this active conformity. By marrying Jude, she lost her best friend and gave up on experiencing a “rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep and down it could be. So different from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years” (98).

Sula’s presence now makes Nel realize the acute pain her absence had created, reminding her of all she had lost when she gave up her oppositional stance and allowed herself to be subsumed by the status quo. This is made clear later in the novel when Nel discovers her husband’s infidelity with Sula, and Nel can no longer ignore the symbol of her dissatisfaction with her life as mother/wife, a “gray ball hovering just there. Just there. To the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence” (109). Although when Sula first returns, she is a stronger, more self-confident woman than she was before leaving, the power matrix in their relationship remains static, for it is still Nel who leads. In fact, we see Nel reprimanding Sula for the first time when she brings up the subject of putting Eva away in the home. First, she accuses Sula of changing. Sula initially resists Nel’s attempt to control her and retorts, “You’ve changed, too. I didn’t used to have to explain everything to you” (101). When Nel discovers Sula has put Eva in a home “that ain’t no place for Eva,” she chides
and directly challenges Sula’s decision: “I don’t think that’s right, Sula” (100).

Interestingly, instead of trying to argue with Nel, Sula backs down and tries a technique typically associated with “feminine wiles”—enlisting her sympathy. For the first time, Sula lies to Nel, insisting that she put Eva out only because she feared Eva would try to burn her to death, and she tells Nel about what had happened to Plum. Sula is then described in feminine terms (by whom, it’s not clear—either Nel or the narrator, but most probably, Nel): “Sula, like always, was incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions. When it came to matters of grave importance, she behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out” (101). Nel’s reaction to Sula’s ploy suggests that she has subconsciously picked up on Sula’s feminine demeanor; she has been responding to this exchange by assuming a more masculine, authoritative role to Sula’s feminine, submissive one. Sula completes her performance with a whiny, “What should I do, Nellie? Take her back and sleep with my door locked again?” (101). Like the traditional male who relieves the “weaker vessel” of her problems, Nel jumps in to rescue Sula by telling her they could devise a plan to visit her and buy her better care. In this exchange, Sula realizes that feminine wiles pay off, so she continues the game by asking Nel to take over the financial arrangements. Sula’s Southern Belle behavior is manifested in her “why-don’t-I-have-the-checks-made-over-to-you,-Nellie? You-are-better-at-this-than-I-am” ploy. Nel, not seeming to notice that Sula is manipulating her, decides that such an arrangement is unsatisfactory because it would make Nel look bad—“People will say I’m scheming” (102)—and her inattention to what is really going on in their discussion thereby gives Sula the perfect excuse for keeping control over Eva’s money. Nel has fallen for Sula’s performance, and Sula is able to manipulate Nel into providing her with a “cover”
for her actions. That the two women are no longer totally tuned into one another is made clear when Nel comments that "as long as we know the truth, it don't matter" (102). Nel doesn't know the truth—or does not want to—and Sula isn't going to give it to her. Of course, it is also possible that Nel is manipulating Sula, for by encouraging Sula to keep control of the situation, Nel is, in effect, relinquishing her responsibility for what could happen to Eva. In this exchange, Morrison further subverts gender expectations by having the two women experiment with different ways of perceiving their relationship roles. This exchange does not suggest a heterosexual friendship relationship; instead, it seems suggestive of an intimate pairing, with Nel assuming a decidedly masculine stance and Sula, a passive feminine stance.

Sula continues to flaunt the rules of her community by having sex with married men and, worse yet, discarding them. "Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow" (115). Sula is adopting a masculine persona, and Morrison notes this: "She is a masculine character. . . She will do the kind of things that normally only men do. . . She really behaves like a man. . . She's adventurous, she trusts herself, she's not scared" ("Intimate Things" 26-27). However, as Morrison notes, the community rushes to defend its standards of acceptable gendered behavior, for "that quality of masculinity—and I mean this in the pure sense—in a woman at that time is outrage, total outrage. She can't get away with that" ("Intimate Things" 27). The community recognizes this rejection of its standards, and the men seek revenge by starting a rumor that Sula slept with white men, the one unforgivable sin in that community. She flaunts, finally, the rules of friendship when she has sex with Jude. The
question the community wants to know, the question Nel wants to know, the question the readers want to know is—why? Why would Sula do such a thing, especially to the one woman who has so much affection for her?

This passage suggests several possibilities, one of which is that Sula is transferring her sexual desires for her friend onto her friend’s husband. If Sula cannot consummate her attraction to Nel, then Nel’s husband might be viewed as the next best thing. Spillers argues that Sula’s “hateful passion” is a result of being “circumscribed by the lack of an explicit tradition of imagination or aesthetic work” (30), contending that Sula “overthrows received moralities in a heedless quest for her own irreducible self” (32). In other words, as the novel’s narrator warns, “like any artist with no art form she became dangerous” (121). To find her “irreducible self,” Sula challenges the life of gender conformity expected of her, a task which can be likened to the artist’s ability to imagine new possibilities. Another possibility is that Sula feels that a relationship with a man is always incomplete; for her, sex is just sex, nothing more. “She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman” (121). Sula is unlike her mother and her grandmother, who “simply loved maleness, for its own sake” (41). As Sula dies, this is, in fact, the excuse she offers herself for having sex with Jude: “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything” (147). After all, there is absolutely no suggestion, in the scene in which Nel discovers the two together, that Sula feels any kind of emotional bond for Jude or he for her: “But they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor. . . . on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs. Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other, just their lips” (104). Her lack of
emotional involvement with her male lovers is further borne out in Morrison's description of Sula's feelings about her sexuality. Unlike her mother Hannah, who "simply refused to live without the attentions of a man" (42), Sula prefers to give herself the attention. Sex, instead of bringing Sula closer to her sexual partners, allows her to ignore them and focus instead on herself:

There, 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. . . . That desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people. . . . When her partner disengaged himself, she looked up at him in wonder trying to recall his name; and he looked down at her, smiling with tender understanding of the state of tearful gratitude to which he believed he had brought her. She waiting impatiently for him to turn away and settle into a wet skim of satisfaction and light disgust, leaving her to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony. (123)

This process is only possible "when she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act" (122-23). Sula refuses to play the stereotypical role of the passive female but longs to become empowered by sex; she recognizes, in sexuality, its dynamics of power, for she relishes the "utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power" (123). So perhaps Sula's reason for sleeping with Jude was to exert control over him and—more importantly—Nel. If Nel has been the leader in their relationship, this act of Sula's can be viewed as an attempt to change that power balance, to claim control over the woman she loved and, perhaps, to punish her for the rejection of that friendship's primacy.
Sula’s need for control of the relationship is clear when the two women talk for the last time. She balks at Nel’s feigned concern for her health, knowing the real reason Nel has come—to settle the score. Nel begins by attacking Sula, telling her she shouldn’t be left alone and accusing her of being proud. Sula retorts, “I like my own dirt, Nellie. I’m not proud. You sure have forgotten me” (142). Although Sula is trying to assert herself here, her admission that she feels “forgotten” gets to the heart of the matter; clearly, Sula feels that Nel has forsaken her by marrying Jude. Nel attempts to distance herself from Sula by falling back on that bastion of support, the community and the roles it expects everyone to play: “But you a woman and you alone” (142). Nel is trying to chip away at Sula’s defiant independence and force her to admit to a need for conformity, a need which Nel gave in to years before. Nel’s hurt and anger finally get the upper hand, and she directly attacks Sula: “You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (142). Nel’s tirade suggests she has finally allowed herself to become subsumed by the either/or dichotomous thinking encouraged by her community. Even though the “gray ball of fur” has destroyed her life, Nel is arguing that she and Sula have no other choice than to play the gender roles carefully defined by Medallion’s standards. However, once again, Sula refuses to be intimidated by Nel’s call to conformity and reiterates her need for independence: “I got me. . . . My lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (143). This statement, Sula’s sly attack on Jude, finally gives Nel the courage to get to the issues she has really wanted to discuss, her pain over what she perceives is Sula’s betrayal. Sula’s resentful yet
pained response is telling—"If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (145). Here, finally, she puts forth the real cause for their estrangement, a separation that continued for three years even after Sula returned; Sula feels that by refusing to forgive her, Nel has rejected her and that Nel, therefore, is also responsible for the loss of the friendship. Rejected by her mother, rejected by her best friend whose gratitude she had tried to win, getting instead only "disgust" (141), rejected by the first man she attempted to love, rejected now by the entire community, Sula realizes that she has nobody else on whom to depend. After Nel leaves, their hurt feelings misunderstood and unresolved, Sula recalls the "days when [they] were two throats and one eye and... had no price" (147). Sula's thought—"I didn't mean anything. I never meant anything" (147)—indicates a lack of malice in her actions. It suggests Sula feels a lack of agency in this particular incident. Sula had not hurt her friend and opposed her community merely for the pleasure of tormenting it. Sula knew that her community would have tried to destroy whatever it was that made her Sula. This explains her fierce determination not to let men take over her life, not even allow her beloved friend to do so or her community, for, as she asserts, "They ain't worth more than me" (143). McDowell argues that Sula's refusal to allow herself to be categorized by the community is a form of self-defense in that "if the self is perceived as perpetually in process, rather than a static entity always already formed, it is thereby difficult to posit its ideal or 'positive' representation" (81).

By rejecting a purely feminine representation for her characters, Morrison circumvents the establishment of a male standard by which all are measured. However, Sula recognizes the high price she has paid for this refusal to conform to what McDowell describes as "the
normative female script" (84); this active resistance, and the last thing she thinks as she
dies, “wait’ll I tell Nell” (149), poignantly exemplifies this loss.

Nel, however, has yet to recognize the full price she’s paid for her active
conformity. She does not do so until years later, when her whole life and her community
have changed. Deserted by her husband and left to rear the children on her own, Nel gives
in and “pinned herself into a tiny life” (165), totally absorbed in her role as single parent.
At fifty-five, her children grown and on their own, she begins to play the role her mother
had so relished, that of the righteous, church-going woman. Thus, the price Nel pays for
conformity is a life of single parenthood, being left with only a love for her children that
“like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and
a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off” (165). When Jude leaves her, Nel falls
apart and quits acting with agency. She allows herself to meander through her life, her
only active action being an avoidance of facing the pain of the loss of her husband and best
friend. Still, she is able to find some measure of smug self-assurance until, as part of her
church duties, she pays a visit to Sunnydale, where Eva Peace resides, alone.

Eva calls Nel’s smug self-assurance into question when she accuses Nel of killing
Chicken Little. Nel at first denies her involvement and blames Sula but is clearly unsettled
when Eva insists she admit her responsibility in the boy’s death. Eva’s words haunt her.
Nel finally allows herself to remember the day the boy died. Still denying her
responsibility, she declares to herself that she had merely been a passive observer: “I did
not watch it. I just saw it” (170). In spite of her denial, the feelings that day return to her
and she remembers “the good feeling she had had when Chicken’s hands slipped. She
hadn’t wondered about that in years. ‘Why didn’t I feel bad when it happened? How
come it felt so good to see him fall?" (170). She is now able to recognize that she had enjoyed the power she felt when she was able to remain calm but Sula had fallen apart. She now can attribute her feelings to "the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation" (170). This epiphany foreshadows a more important one that occurs at the novel's end, Nel's realization that it was her friendship for Sula for which she had longed all these years. As soon as she is conscious of this, the gray ball of fur which had tormented her for years "broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (174). Finally, the full impact of her loss, a loss generated by blind conformity to the narrow limits of her community, hits her: "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. . . . We were girls together," she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.' It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174). Thus, at the novel's end, Nel realizes that her failure to act in a "masculine" way—to grab what it was she truly desired, her friendship with Sula—is at the heart of her unhappiness and lack of fulfillment. By playing the culturally-acceptable role of the good mother/daughter/wife, she curtailed her choices and expended her creative energies in keeping the "ball of fur" at bay.

In Sula, Morrison demonstrates both the advantages and disadvantages of succumbing to hegemonic notions of behavior. Although it is clear Morrison does not seek to completely demolish these notions—for the community and its standards play a vital role in maintaining the integrity of African American identity—she does provoke readers into questioning them. As Spillers notes, when we read Sula, "No Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interest—black/white, male/female, good/bad—will do" ("A Hateful Passion" 296). Through the characters Nel and Sula, Morrison shows us that
individuals must be agents in their development, not helpless victims; although she makes clear the struggle to selfhood is not an easy one, her novel calls upon her audience to assume an active role in achieving selfhood. Sula suggests that blindly accepting either/or, male/female dichotomies is detrimental. McDowell contends that Morrison’s refusal to embrace these dichotomies is her response to those Afro-American critics who desire black female authors to create “a world cleansed of uncertainty and contradiction and based on the rhetorical polarities—positive and negative” (86). These critics urge black women writers to imagine only “positive” portrayals of black characters (especially males), the “positive” being based, of course, on a masculine standard. However, by ignoring the pressure to limit her creative capabilities in this way, Morrison points us toward the possibility of envisioning these dichotomies in new, disruptive, ways.

1 In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrisons says she based Nel on the model of the “warm, conventional woman, one of those people you know are going to pay the gas bill and take care of the children” (12), “someone who . . . is responsible and goes to church and so on” (14).
2 In Quiet as It’s Kept, Bouson cites research concerning skin-color stereotyping in African-American teenagers; the researcher discovered that “many [African-American teenagers] believe that light skin is feminine and dark skin is masculine, and very light skinned boys and very dark skinned girls often suffer from being at odds with this cultural stereotype” (Parrish qtd. in Bouson 226-27). If the Medallion community does perceive the Pease women as “sooty,” this might help to explain the community’s begrudging acceptance of some of their masculine, nonconformist tendencies.
3 This reading is reinforced in another passage in the novel, when Morrison describes Sula and Ajax’s lovemaking in terms of a tree growing out of the earth: “I will see the loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs” (130).
4 For a discussion of the lesbian themes in Sula, see Barbara Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.”
5 In Paradise, Morrison notes that a little girl’s reputation in her community is permanently damaged when she innocently removes her panties to ride a horse.
6 Bouson argues that Sula “becomes a site in the text of female contempt and shamelessness and also female rage and rebellion” (62).
7 Bouson discusses the “racist mythology which constructs black women as the racial and sexual Other,” a mythology based on the belief that “African-American women are hypersexed and therefore debased” (48). By this standard, Sula’s insistence on sexual freedom would infuriate her community because she is also refusing to become a role model of “good black girl” behavior. Bouson contends that through Sula, “Morrison evokes but also interrogates these shaming racist constructions” (48).
8 This would support Smith’s argument that the novel features lesbian themes.
It is interesting to note that the phrasing of Sula’s denial of responsibility—“I didn’t mean anything”—was given to her by Nel, in response Chicken Little’s death: “Sh, sh. Don’t, don’t. You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault” (63).
CHAPTER 3

The Wisdom of *Solomon:*

Flying Away From Gender Norms

Citing Toni Morrison's comment that "one needs to think of the immediate political climate in which [a] writing took place," Susan Farrell has persuasively argued that critics need to do this in their criticism. Farrell focuses on what happened in the civil rights/black power movements of the 1960's, describing the difficulties Black women faced with the ideology declared in Stokely Carmichael's boast: "the only position for women . . . is prone." Farrell takes to task other critics' evaluations of Morrison's novels. Farrell argues that Morrison's novel "is rewritten as a search for family and cultural roots. In contrast to the black power movement's struggle to attain 'manhood,' the novel presents a journey to 'personhood' and to community" (147). Farrell sees Morrison using "the example of patriarchy to criticize what she sees as dangerous about the black power movement, about any political movement for that matter: the tendency to say what should dominate, what should be given value, ahead of individual stories and priorities" (143). However, as Harper points out, the black power movement was not just pro-masculine; it was vehemently anti-gay. Citing numerous examples of homophobic references in the Black Arts movement, Harper argues blackness became associated with masculine heterosexuality. Followers of the Black Arts movement promoted this ideology because, by trying to invoke their own "rootedness" in the black community, they took on "tradiitional (Euro-American) categories of intellectual endeavor" (51). Since this association threatened to link them to "whiteness," they overcompensated with strident heterosexuality.
Farrell herself is guilty of the very myopia for which she criticizes others. The civil rights/black power movement was not the only arena of discontent in 1977, when *Song of Solomon* was first published. This was also the time of heated debates in the feminist and lesbian/gay communities. More specifically, the 1970’s were an era when, as Amanda Udis-Keller points out, the bisexual revolution got its start. Although Morrison may not have been consciously working out her novel within this particular framework, it is highly unlikely she would have been totally unaffected by these movements, especially when one considers Morrison’s interest in gender roles and opposing the hegemony. Morrison does, in fact, incorporate some of the ideas found in the gay/lesbian discourse of the 70’s, but like many literary critics speaking on this novel, but with few exceptions, she also seems incapable of completely letting go of the binary oppositions of male vs. female and heterosexuality vs. lesbianism/homosexuality. In this paper, I would like to study the ways in which Morrison treats this topic to try to come to some understanding of why a writer who is so often praised for avoiding absolutes would still offer a somewhat rigid way of viewing human behavior.

Foucault argues that gender is socially-constructed. In some interviews, Morrison has suggested she believes otherwise, but in an interview with Rosemarie K. Lester, we can see her teetering back and forth on her own opinion: “My true feeling is that they [male attitudes] are inherent, *though I’m perfectly willing to be persuaded that they are not*, and I’ve read a lot of literature that suggest all of this business is obviously learned.
... But I think that males—malesness—tends to be inherent. ... But there is an idea, a concept, of masculinity which can be transferred, certainly [emphasis added]” (48). She bases her opinion on her first-hand experience of rearing two boys, noting she wasn’t “a good father—I was a good head-of-household. ... and then I discovered ... that you can only be what you are, and deliver what you have, and that you can’t provide the other things” (47). Her words here suggest she has a clear idea of what a “father” is and sees it as diametrically opposed to what a “mother” is, avoiding the gender-neutral word “parent,” which carries no gender-laden connotations. But again, even though she strongly argues for the innateness of gender, she immediately undermines her stance. She continues,

As boys, my sons were attracted to danger and risk in a way that I was not. ... *And part of that may be education and socialization.* ... Their demands on a mother were very primitive; they didn’t really care what I was about, they wanted service and attention [a tendency which even parents of girls have noted]. ... *I don’t have girl children, and perhaps if I did, I’d say something equally astonishing about them.* ... Having watched them grow up, I was able, I think, to enter into a male view of the world which, to me, *means a delight in dominion*—a definite need to exercise dominion over place and people. *My upbringing was very strict, we were very passive girls and we took orders well. This is all stereotypical and general, obviously there are variations in men and women,* but if you think of the classic definition of masculinity versus femininity, then there is the question of dominion. I
watched them in their play and in that desire to control [emphasis added].

(Lester 47-48)

Although arguing maleness is innate, she constantly admits that her opinions are based on personal experience only and, in fact, go against current literature. By noting that she grew up in a home in which rigid gender definitions were and emphasizing she had no experience rearing females, she points out her biases. Clearly, in her personal life as well as her literary life, Morrison acknowledges the “blurred edges” of most controversies. However, these admissions still do not prepare us for her startling comments in an interview with Stepto. Speaking of what she sees as “a major failing of black men—leaving,” she nonetheless boasts that “that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life” (26). In essence, Morrison contends that males are innately dominating and reluctant to take on responsibilities, yet she praises them for behaviors that are clearly destructive. Why would a writer who has written so passionately about the evils of foisting stereotyped identities upon humans also contribute to these narrow, limiting stereotypes?

To answer this question, we must first examine gender stereotyping and homophobia within the black community. Next, we will see how those biases are magnified when applied to someone who resists being defined in any way by gender stereotypes.

Patricia Hill Collins notes that “African-Americans have tried to ignore homophobia generally and have avoided serious analysis of homophobia within African-American communities” (193). Collins asks, “Why have African-American women been strangely silent on the issue of Black lesbianism?” and quotes Barbara
Smith’s response: “Heterosexual privilege is usually the only privilege that Black women have,” so “maintaining ‘straightness’ is our last resort” (194). Collins adds that another reason may be the tendency to view Black lesbians as “the ultimate other”; these “others” “generate anxiety, discomfort, and a challenge to the dominate group’s control of power and sexuality on the interpersonal level” (194). Audre Lorde noted that some black women believe that “black lesbians are a threat to black nationhood, are consorting with the enemy, are basically unblack” (290).

However, there is something even more terrifying to the hegemonic community than lesbianism: bisexuality. This attitude is quite evident in writing of Cheryl Clarke: “There is the woman who engages in sexual-emotional relationships with women and labels herself bisexual. (This is comparable to the Afro-American whose skin color indicates her mixed ancestry yet you calls herself ‘mulatto’ rather than black.) [emphasis in original]” (244). Clarke equates a black woman’s bisexuality with denial of her blackness, a refusal to admit whom she really is—a black woman and a lesbian. Thus Clarke, while trying to interrupt the hegemonic discourse, actually upholds it by insisting upon the either/or categorization of heterosexual/homosexual. She urges her audience to become “liberated from the false premise of heterosexual superiority” only to establish a new homosexual superiority!

Many Queer theorists have documented the biphobia present in both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. Udis-Kessler, in “Identity/Politics: Historical Sources of the Bisexual Movement,” notes that the bisexual movement was actually an offshoot of the lesbian feminist movement, “led by women—and surprisingly, many women who once identified as lesbian feminists” (53). In the 1970’s
lesbian feminist movement, heterosexual women were seen as “suspect” because they were, in effect, sleeping with the enemy. As Udis-Kessler points out, even if these lesbians occasionally found themselves in bed with a man, they kept this secret. But these women felt the pressure of mainstream lesbian feminists who declared that bisexuality was merely a “desire to invade or infiltrate lesbian space” (Udis-Kessler 56). Similarly, Amber Ault has argued that “negative sentiment toward bisexuality and bisexual women finds expression in a wide variety of forms of discrimination, erasure, invalidation, and prejudice in lesbian feminist communities and discourse” (204). In “Hegemonic Discourse in an Oppositional Community: Lesbian Feminist Stigmatization of Bisexual Women,” Ault attempts to explain the reasoning embraced by biphobic people. One of the most prevalent is the lesbian feminist “either-you-are-with-us-or-against-us” mentality. Anything less than an either/or dichotomy is unacceptable. Ault enumerates the various methods employed by lesbians to “neutralize” bisexuality. One of the most interesting, in terms of Morrison’s works, is incorporation, an act which “acknowledges bisexual existence but denies its integrity by constructing bisexuals as ‘really either heterosexual or homosexual.’ This creates the presumption that those bisexuals who are ‘really lesbians’ will eventually experience enlightenment and thereby become legitimate [emphasis mine]” (208). The use of incorporation “hinges on an essentialist and binary construction of sexual identity. In this discourse, sexual identity is constructed as bifurcated; subjects ‘are’ either heterosexual or homosexual” (209). It is my contention that almost all of Morrison’s characters are, in fact, “incorporated” characters. They are allowed to “experiment” with their gender identities but only become “legitimate” when they
embrace an "essentialist and binary construction" and return to their physically sexed selves. To test this idea, I'd like to look at her novel, *Song of Solomon*.

It would be impossible to discuss *Song of Solomon* without a discussion of myth. The standard European journey quest has a long, rich history and has been a useful device for many authors. Numerous critics have argued that Morrison's novel closely follows the pattern of the traditional European journey quest. Others, however, contend that because the traditional quest myth is European and phallocentric, Morrison could not take it at face value. Since, as Awkward argues, "myth's function is to contribute to the maintenance of the norms and values of the culture out of which 'sacred narrative' emerges" (485), writers like Morrison, who speak from outside the hegemonic discourse, find the use of traditional myth problematic. Whose norms and values will be transmitted? Whose sacred narrative will be told? Non-European writers, then, are faced with a choice: abandon the form altogether or alter it to fit their needs. Many critics argue that Morrison transforms the mythic quest into something entirely different. Michael Awkward notes that although Morrison's interest in myth "derives . . . from an awareness of myth's usefulness in the transmission of ideology and in the preservation of cultural wisdom, values, and world views" (486), she appropriates the standard myth structure, giving it a new meaning. Although Morrison "approximates the narrative structures of phallocentric Western myths" (Awkward 494), her use is "both a critique of the phallocentric nature of traditional myth and the creation of the possibilities for female-centered myths with women as hero and subject" (487). She does this, Awkward contends, by disrupting "the androcentric sequence" and by appropriating African-American myth into her
novels (487). "Rather than reinventing patrimony, Morrison’s novel affirms the timeless relevance of the folktale’s cultural truths, while exposing contemporary perversions of the myth’s insistence on the importance of male transcendent flight as implicitly phallocentric in their inscription of a perpetually inferior—non-heroic—status for the female” (Awkward 496). By showing us the horrific consequences for women and children of male flight, Awkward argues, Morrison has significantly altered and thereby claimed the standard mythic structure.\(^3\)

Are the novel’s main characters, Milkman and Pilate, really disruptions of the standard myth? And if so, in what ways do they disrupt it? I would like to argue that we do need to view them as gender disruptions. Morrison transforms the feminist notion of “gendered” writing by creating “bigendered” heroes, characters who embody both masculine and feminine characteristics. We can see this tendency clearly in Milkman and Pilate. However, the disruptions these two characters cause are not lasting. In the case of Milkman, Morrison does not allow him to remain bigendered; at the novel’s end, he returns to his masculine stance. And Pilate, at her death, becomes, perhaps, too much of the standard sacrificial female.

In the beginning of the novel, Milkman’s maleness is pivotal. Because there are at least thirteen years between himself and his two sisters, they are lumped together in the narrative, which focuses more attention on him. He is the little boy who accidentally urinates on his sister, the son who will eventually take over his father’s business. Even his nickname reiterates his masculinity: Milkman (a name about which we’ll have more to say later). When the novel first turns its full attention on Milkman, he is about twelve years old and in the constant company of his best
friend, Guitar, who introduces him to the masculine realm of pool halls, hanging out, and generally getting into trouble. A typical pubescent male, he delights in defying his father and accompanies Guitar on a trip to the forbidden aunt’s house. By age fourteen, his relationship with his father is so strained that he “felt closer . . . to [FDR] than to his own father. . . . Milkman feared his father, respected him, but knew, because of the leg [Milkman’s shorter leg], that he could never emulate him. So he differed from him as much as he dared” (Morrison 63). In short, everything about the beginnings of Milkman’s life points to a thoroughly masculine male, especially when, at twenty-two, he knocks Macon into the radiator after his father hits his mother. However, as Duvall points out, his attack on Macon is less a defense of his mother and sisters than a masculine way of claiming power over them (100).

Milkman’s sexist attitudes towards his mother and sisters are manifest throughout the novel’s beginning; he admits he has never loved his mother and doesn’t attempt to help her in his dream in which she is being attacked by phallic flowers; the narrator tells us he didn’t see his mother as an individual even when he attacked Macon for slapping her. By twenty-two, he begins to have some sense of his mother being something other than his mother, yet seeing her only as “a frail woman content to do tiny things” (64).

His new perspective on his mother evolves with his own sexual maturity, occurring after “he had been fucking for six years, some of them with the same woman” (64). “Fucking” women is a clear indicator of masculine identity, one on which Milkman prides himself. Another indicator of Milkman’s masculine identity is in his language. Although reared in a home in which everyone speaks “proper” (“white”)
English, Milkman’s friendship with Guitar has given him an entrance into the lower classes. And here, as Harper points out, “a too-evident facility in the standard white idiom can quickly identify one not as a strong black man, but rather as a white-identified Uncle Tom who must also, therefore, be weak, effeminate, and probably a ‘fag’” (11). Milkman, however, is able to slip easily in and out of “black” English, and his ability to do so greatly aids his father. Macon has hired his son to collect rents from reluctant tenants, and Milkman’s ability to speak the “native” language puts them at ease and diffuses what could be tense situations.

The attack upon his father begins to force Milkman to change his way of thinking, but he continues to think within a masculine framework. At first, he is merely annoyed with his father for telling his “truth” about Milkman’s mother—that she had been engaged in an incestuous relationship with her father. He is mostly concerned that this revelation will require some responsibility from him, some action. Back in his room after the fight, he stares at his image in the mirror, first noting his “fine” face, “eyes women complimented him on,” and “firm jaw line” (69), all masculine attributes. But then he notes his appearance “lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back” (69-70). Clearly, Milkman’s sense of self has been shaken. Although he views himself as a “man peeping around a corner,” Morrison’s image here is that of the naughty and uncertain child. And it is difficult not to parallel this image with that of his perception of his mother, whom he has described as “too insubstantial” (75). This amorphous view of himself is further
emphasized when he remembers that he was able to avoid being drafted because of his father’s intervention; Macon had declared Milkman “necessary to support family” (69). The irony of this declaration is immediately apparent to the readers, for clearly, at this point in his life, Milkman is woefully ill-prepared to support himself, let alone his family.

Immediately after his confrontation with his father, Milkman puts together the puzzle pieces of his early life and figures out the previously-hidden origin of his nickname—his mother’s prolonged breast feeding of him. Morrison shows us that this confrontation with his father is the impetus for Milkman’s mythic hero quest with his increasing interest in the origins of his names, both the one given him at birth and the one foisted upon him by a nosey prankster. Mulling over all he has just heard, Milkman decides to visit his aunt Pilate. He tells Guitar, “I’m gonna ask her what my name is” (89).

In spite of his intentions to learn his name, Milkman allows himself to fall into passive inaction. His friendship with Guitar becomes strained when Milkman figures out he is being kept from something important in Guitar’s life. Milkman begins to feel “his life was pointless, aimless. . . . He was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all” (107). Tired of being chased around and attacked by the love-sick Hagar, at thirty, he finally feels “a yearning to be surrounded by strangers” (162) and tells Macon he is going to leave home for awhile, to “get a job on my own, live on my own” (163). Milkman’s vague plans for leaving are quickly supplanted by far more specific plans; after hearing of the green bag hanging in Pilate’s house (“her inheritance”), Macon
excitedly convinces his son that the bag contains gold and urges Milkman to steal it from her.

We begin to see some blurring of the gender lines in Chapter 8, when Milkman decides to involve Guitar with his plan to steal the bag. Excited, Guitar greets his friend and says, “My man” (174). This display of masculine exuberance—calling Milkman “man” and slapping him—is followed by an allusion to passive females waiting to be “plucked”: “Legal tender. I love it. Sounds like a virgin bride” (174). Morrison quickly makes another comparison to their adventure and a girl’s virginity. After making tentative plans with Guitar to steal the gold, Milkman begins to wonder about the extent of Guitar’s involvement in the Seven Days. Had he killed anyone yet? Milkman, the narrator tells us, “was like a teen-age girl wondering about the virginity of her friend, a manner newly minted—different, separate, focused somehow” (176). Milkman recalls their youthful rebellion of terrorizing those weaker than themselves, noting however that “now they were men, and the terror they needed to provoke in others . . . was rarer but not lighter. Dominion won by fear and secured by fear was still sweeter than any that could be got another way” (177). This exaggerated male posturing is quickly juxtaposed with another image of male excess: a peacock in full plumage. Interestingly, Milkman is unable to discern the peacock’s sex: “Look—she’s flying down”—and is informed by Guitar that “the male is the only one got that tail full of jewelry. Son of a bitch” (178). A moment later, however, Guitar decides to use the peacock as an object lesson for Milkman, telling him the peacock cannot fly because it has “too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you
down” (179). Of course, vanity is traditionally associated with the feminine, yet the peacock jumps onto the hood of a Buick, and cars are typically associated with images of male virility. Here, Morrison further mixes masculine/feminine imagery with Guitar’s reaction: “‘Faggot.’ Guitar laughed softly. ‘White faggot’” (179).

Later on, like the stereotypical finicky woman, Milkman begins to vacillate in his decision to steal the gold. In addition, Milkman has begun to lose the ability to understand his best friend. As Milkman and Guitar become further polarized from one another, Guitar assuming a macho stance and Milkman a more feminine one, we begin to see their ability to communicate with one another disintegrate. Milkman mistakenly believes that Guitar is willing to help him rob Pilate because he “could not resist the lure of something he had never had—money” (181). Guitar’s mind, however, is focused on a very masculine pursuit, “the wonders of TNT” (181): blowing things (people) up. Guitar doesn’t notice that he and Milkman are no longer “in tune” with one another, chiding Milkman for his hesitancy and telling him, “I don’t even know why you doing it. You know about me—you can guess why I’m in it” (181). But as we have seen, Milkman doesn’t understand his friend’s motivation, even though Guitar had clearly spelled it out for him earlier. Many language theorists argue that men and women speak in different ways, and this accounts for the frequent difficulty in the two sexes understanding one another; if that is indeed the case, the misunderstandings between the two men can be viewed as indicative of a gulf created by the increasing gender disparity forming.

When Milkman voices his fear that they may be harmed by the women in the house, Guitar assures Milkman that the women don’t have guns (obvious emblems of
masculinity) and then ridicules him: “Suppose all three of them are there. They’re women. What can they do? Whip us? [emphasis added]” (182). Guitar is suggesting that Milkman is acting like a frightened girl or a “pussy-whipped” man. Milkman blames his hesitancy on what seems to him the ephemeral (feminine) nature of the plot; it had seemed like “some fairy tale mess” (183). (Is Morrison punning on the word “fairy” here? A weak, feminine plot devised by a homosexual?) Our narrator tells us that “Guitar believed it [the plot], gave it a crisp concreteness, and what’s more, made it into an act, an important, real, and daring [masculine] thing to do. He felt a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self” (184). Guitar’s concrete, masculine self-assurance is in stark contrast to Milkman’s feminine hesitancy and amorphous sense of self.

Making the “hit,” Milkman climbs up on Guitar’s shoulders to exit a window, suggesting once again his feminine weakness; on their escape out the window, Guitar has to reach back “to help Milkman over” (186). Milkman’s masculinity is undermined again by the embarrassing failure of their mission. He and Guitar end up being arrested, and Milkman has to depend on his “daddy’s” money and his aunt’s acting to get him out of jail. The next day, “something like shame stuck to his skin. Shame at being spread-eagled, fingered [like a woman during sex?] and handcuffed. Shame at having stolen a skeleton, like a kid on a Halloween trick-or-treat prank rather than a grown man making a hit [emphasis added]” (209).

Interestingly, Milkman’s sister, Lena, berates him for being too masculine. She is angry with him for having told their father about Corinthian’s relationship with Porter (Lena does not know he is a member of the Seven Days). Lena uses the image
of masculine urination—recalling the times he urinated on her dress when they were young, urinated on the tree outside her window—to make her point. She hits Milkman in the face and tells him “there are all kinds of ways to pee on people” (214). She asks him, “Where do you get the right to decide our lives? [emphasis in original]” and then answers her own question: “from that hog’s gut that hangs down between you legs,” warning him, “You will need more than that. I don’t know where you will get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that” (215). “As Lena deflates Milkman’s phallocentric and unconscious existence” (Demetrakopoulos “Interdependence” 96), she effectively castrates Milkman with her disgusted references to his “pride of manhood,” his penis, by comparing it to a limp, impotent “hog’s gut.” When she commands him to leave her room, he decides “it was good advice. . . . Why not take it?” (216). This marks the end of Part I and the beginning of Milkman’s journey.

Few critics dispute that Milkman embarks on a search for his identity. However, while some have focused on his journey as his negotiation of the individual vs. the community, others have noted the significance of gender—masculine vs. feminine—as well.4 Farrell states that

in order to recreate an identity for himself, Milkman must strive for a kind of manhood based not on the model supplied by his father and accepted by some within the protest movements of the 1960s—a white, middle-class paternalism—but rather on a model suggested by his own unique black history and cultural heritage. Milkman must learn a new language that will help him challenge and subvert the dominant discourse of racism as well as an
exclusively individualistic ideology that prevents political cohesion or change.

(145)

Ironically, in order to divest himself of his excessive masculinity, Milkman’s journey takes him into the realm of ultra-masculinity, the hunt.

Milkman’s quest begins with an airplane flight, and flight is consistently linked in this novel with masculine prerogative. Milkman luxuriates in the “feeling of invulnerability” the flight affords him (220). This trip he “wanted to do by himself. . . . He wanted to go solo” (220). However, even here, Morrison leaves hints that Milkman’s masculinity is about to be challenged. After he tells Guitar about his plans to leave, Guitar’s response is terse and cold: “You don’t act like a man on his way to the end of the rainbow [emphasis added]” (221). Milkman responds, “I don’t want to be my old man’s office boy no more” (222). Guitar then launches into a lecture on the significance of black manhood: “Everybody wants the life of a black man” (221). He continues, emphasizing the word “man” often, and says, “They [black women] won’t even let you risk your own life, man. . . . 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?” (223). When Milkman points out that white women seem to want much the same and asks why the Days would “worry about the colored woman at all,” Guitar responds with the hyper-masculine, sexist, “Because she’s mine [emphasis in original]” (223). When Milkman persists in disputing Guitar’s logic, pointing out that Milkman’s own father tried to kill Milkman, Guitar refuses to abandon his line of thought and calls Milkman’s gender into question by retorting, “Maybe he thought you were a little girl” (223), finishing his attack by telling Milkman that his father “behaves like a white man, thinks like a
white man" (223), which would put him outside the realm of black masculinity. Guitar
is openly attacking Milkman’s manhood and thereby calling into question his identity
as a black person.

Morrison further emphasizes Milkman’s liminal status at the beginning of his
journey. After his gratifying flight, Milkman must travel by bus, where he is dismayed
to discover a lack of men’s rooms; this discovery has an unsettling effect, quickly
deflating the masculine high the flight had given him, because “suddenly he felt
ridiculous” (227). Pointed towards Reverend Cooper’s house to find information
about his family, “he is put in the position of trying ‘to make a pleasant impression on
a stranger’” (Harris 97). This willingness to please others is typically associated with
submissive, feminine behavior, and this is, perhaps, the first time Milkman has utilized
it. Later, by describing Milkman’s standing in front of Circe’s house in terms of the
old fairy tale, Hansel and Gretel, Morrison further undermines his adult masculine
status; although still posited as male, within the context of a fairy tale he is a child.
Moments later, upon finding himself in a frightening embrace with Circe, he discovers
himself re-living his childhood nightmare of being grabbed by a witch; in his childhood,
“he would wake with a scream and an erection. Now he had only the erection” (239).
Morrison continues to mix childhood innocence with adult sexuality when Circe “took
his hand in both of hers, and he followed her—like a small boy being dragged
reluctantly to bed” (240). When he mentions his acquaintance with the Reverend
Cooper, Circe responds, “So you’ve been staying with that little Cooper boy?” (241).
Although one might argue that Morrison is merely portraying Circe as a crazy,
deluded old woman, something more is occurring. In many ways, Milkman is a thirty-
something infant; half-man, half-child, Morrison is clearly sending Milkman on a
journey of change.

Numerous critics have focused on the mythic qualities of his first search for the
missing gold. His entry into the cave/womb can be viewed as a rebirth, complete with
baptism by water in the creek and ceremonial eating of wild, bitter berries. But this is
just the preface to his real initiation, which comes at the hands of the local men in
Shalimar.

His stay in Shalimar begins almost by accident, when his car breaks down. His
situation worsens when he discovers that Guitar is searching for him. Although he
tries to reassure himself that all is well between him and Guitar, when he’s given
Guitar’s message—“Your day is here”—he knows trouble is imminent. Stuck without
a running vehicle, Milkman surveys the local scenery. Seeing the women walking “in
the road swaying their hips under cotton dresses, bare-legged,” he decides he wants
“one of them bad” (263). Sitting by the road watching the children play, Milkman
notes a black rooster strut by; Morrison immediately links the rooster’s bravado to
Milkman’s by having the narrator tell us that Milkman needed “a place to stay, some
information, and a woman” (265). It is no surprise when, a few minutes later, he
reenters the grocery store and senses “that he’d struck a wrong note. About the
women, he guessed. What kind of place was this where a man couldn’t even ask for a
woman?” (265). Ignoring the warning signs, he asks for a rooming house “where a
man can spend the night” (265). Annoyed by the proprietor’s reluctance to help him,
Milkman decides to take a commanding stance, telling the man, “If they can’t find one
[a belt for his car], let me know right away,” adding, “I may have to buy another car to
get back home” (266). As the narrator notes, Milkman “hadn’t bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, [and] had called them ‘them’ . . . He was telling them that they weren’t men, . . . but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers” (266).

Milkman’s cocky “white” ways will not go unpunished by the men of Shalimar. Bjork argues that “to these people, his materially endowed superior airs are not adequate to justify his existence as a black man; Milkman must prove himself in the traditionally physical struggle with other men” (104). Harris, however, more accurately picks up on the sexual ramifications of their attack:

Milkman has the power, manner, clothes, and money the black men identify with white men; therefore, they focus their first test on his sexual capacity—is he as much a man in sexual matters as the signs suggest, or can he be a “faggot”? If they can humiliate him with insinuations about homosexuality, and perhaps embarrass him or drive him away, they can restore to themselves some of the lack of manhood his presence makes them feel. The ritual of transference is old, though its specific manifestations may be unique. If Milkman leaves the scene, then the men will feel justified in not helping or accepting him. If he can hold his own and somehow survive their insults, then they will stop the ritual testing and tolerate him, perhaps even accept him into the community. (99)

They begin their attack by mocking that ever-present symbol of masculinity, his penis. They tell him they’ve heard that Northerner’s penises are “wee little. . . wee, wee little” (267). Next, they attack his sexual orientation by asking him to verify that
information. When he replies, "I wouldn't know... I never spent much time
smacking my lips over another man's dick," they are ready for him: "What about his
ass hole? Ever smack your lips over that?" (267). Milkman returns with a redoubled
homophobia: "Once... when a little young nigger made me mad and I had to jam a
Coke bottle up his ass" (267). When one of the men attacks Milkman with a knife, he
is able to escape only through the intervention of two women who call his attacker,
Saul, in check. Emasculated by the women's rescue, in order to reinstate his
masculine stance Milkman can do little more than hurl his broken Coke bottle into a
corner and "[kick] at a white hen," an obvious symbol of femininity. His reaction is
perhaps a reminder of the very incident he has narrated to his attackers moments
before. The fight with Saul is but the preface to Milkman's real initiation, which occurs
on the coon hunt.

Milkman's willingness to fight earns him some respect from the Shalimar men,
but they decide to test him further. For Harris, the hunt "is a metaphorical way for
him to shed the negative connotations of his lack of manliness, the negative
connotations of his lack of commitment to the black community and black people, and
to gain a victory from that confrontation with absence" (102). Interestingly, the
change which Milkman experiences on the hunt occurs primarily when he is alone.
When Milkman the "city boy" is thrust into a new world of "mother nature," he is
destabilized and unsure how to act. Although he lies to the men and tells them he is
the "best shot there is" (269), Milkman has, in fact, no experience with guns. If one
views guns, in this instance, as symbolic phallices, Morrison is grounding Milkman in
the feminine at the beginning of the hunt because "Milkman needs to undergo the
death of the masculine ego to become a complete person” (Demetrakopoulos “Interdependence” 93). His self-confidence is shattered when he finds himself unable to keep up with the old man leading him and is unable to understand the “language” of the dogs and their handlers. Sitting down, exhausted, under the (feminine) moon, “his self—the cocoon that was ‘personality’ gave way” (277). He realizes that he must let go of the stereotypically “masculine,” purely analytical ways of thinking; in order to succeed here, he must give in to the traditionally feminine realm of intuition. He must let go of the language that is written down—the language once used to control and abuse his ancestors—and tune himself into “what there was before language. . . . Language in the time when men and animals did talk to one another” (278), before speciesism differentiated/ “othered” the animals. He finds himself cradled by a tree whose roots are “like the rough but maternal hand of a grandfather [emphasis added]” (279). Morrison’s consistent juxtaposition of the maternal and paternal here is not accidental; she is showing us this blending of male/female to indicate the changes sweeping over Milkman. This sort of blending “could function to disrupt and further open a paradigm that depends on binary oppositions” (Goldman 177); it is, in fact, just the sort of disruption Butler advocates.

Milkman is forced to return to a masculine mode, nonetheless, when he is attacked by Guitar. However, this encounter is not conveyed entirely within the masculine realm. Milkman discovers that the masculine cannot always be counted on to save him; he “grabbed the Winchester at his side, cocked it, and pulled the trigger, shooting into the trees in front of him” (279). This “premature ejaculation” of his gun does nothing to deter Guitar’s attempt to cut off Milkman’s breath with his wire.
“Guitar tries to cut off his head as Milkman lets go of his overblown ego, a kind of head or mind castration, a relinquishing of power, that releases him to growth. He escapes from Guitar and the whole rest of the novel portrays his new found self. For Milkman, this death of his ego is the beginning of his real life” (Demetrakopoulos “Interdependence” 93). (This symbolic castration is the preface to a very real one that occurs when the men skin the bobcat.) Milkman has fired off his last shot, so he returns to the men with his empty (impotent) gun (phallus).

That he has incorporated the feminine is apparent when he offers up an excuse to the men as to why they heard a gunshot and he missed the big moment of the kill. Like the stereotypically weak woman in every cheap science fiction movie, whose high heel turns over at a critical moment while the creature is pursuing her, Milkman tells the men that he “dropped the gun. I tripped and it went off. Then when I picked it up it went off again” (280). When the men laugh, Milkman knows that, for the first time, they have truly accepted him. He joins in their laughter and admits he was “scared to death.” The men jest about his “womanish” behavior, but now that Milkman has finally put aside his masculine posturing and superior attitude, he becomes part of their group.6

The ritualistic skinning and castration of the dead bobcat further symbolizes the combination of both the masculine and the feminine in that here we have male genitalia being removed from the cat, an animal which is symbolic of masculinity and femininity, as its name suggests—“bob,” a masculine nickname, and “cat,” an animal perceived as feminine. The men offer Milkman the bobcat’s heart, also symbolic of the feminine.
The hunt changes Milkman’s behavior. Morrison demonstrates his newly-blended gender identification in his treatment of the townswoman, Sweet. “Now that he has proved his manhood on their terms, the men judge him to be ready to sleep with one of the local women. She becomes one of the rewards for the quester having successfully completed his quest. Hers is a ritual of reclamation for him, which involves purification before lovemaking” (Harris 103). However, instead of expecting his “reward” to minister to his needs (as he had desired when he first looked upon the women of Shalimar), Milkman and Sweet engage in an equal worship of one another: “She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back” (285). He even ventures into the traditionally feminine realm of housekeeping by washing her dishes, scouring her tub, and making her bed. In Sweet’s bed, he dreams of flight, but not in the singularly masculine way of having his “arms stretched out like [a phallic] airplane” or by an ejaculatory method of being “shot forward like Superman in a horizontal dive” (299). He now dreams his flight in a masculine/feminine, fetal “floating, cruising . . . relaxed position of a man lying on a couch reading a newspaper” (298). He realizes that “hating his parents, his sisters, seemed silly now” (300) because he no longer has to be his father’s rival for his mother’s attention or curse the feminine to elevate the masculine. The boundaries between male and female have blurred. In one particularly illuminating sentence, Morrison tells us Milkman cannot wait to tell his “father, Pilate” about his newly-found knowledge. Instead of using the conjunction “and,” which would signal difference between the two, Morrison uses the comma to make the sister
an appositive describing the brother; the two are, then, essentially one, male and female combined.

Several critics have praised Milkman’s transformation at this point. Duvall argues that Milkman’s transformation shows that “it is possible for African-American men to reconceive their masculinity in a nonpatriarchal fashion, that is, in a way that does not reduce African-American women as objects to be possessed” (110), but several critics disagree. Milkman’s “gender-blending” is not complete. When he brags to Sweet that his great-grandfather “could fly! He didn’t need no airplane,” she responds with a question: “Who’d he leave behind?” (328). Milkman’s exuberant response—“Everybody!”—suggests that he really still has not fully comprehended the feminine.?

Milkman still has not learned to recognize the female in a meaningful way, to criticize his own patriarchal tendencies. The type of manhood he discovers in the forest—‘the woods, hunters, killing’—allows Milkman to reject the bourgeois materialism of white America’s model of manhood, yet it still confines him to the type of sexism evident in the thinking of some of the leaders of the black power movement. . . . Sweet speaks for the ‘other,’ the woman who is forgotten in the midst of male triumph. (Farrell 146)

He is so engrossed with the masculine act of flying and escaping, he has not yet thought about the ramifications of that action on those left behind, even though in this case, the action directly and negatively affected his grandfather, his father, and, of course, himself. If “Milkman must learn a new language that will help him challenge
and subvert the dominant discourse of racism as well as an exclusively individualistic ideology” (Farrell 145), he is clearly not yet reaching that goal.

His lack of understanding becomes painfully clear when he reaches Pilate’s house, oblivious to what has transpired since he so cruelly left Hagar, his cousin and castoff lover, the letter and the money. Only when on the cellar floor does what he has just experienced connect with his own past. Suddenly, he realizes that something had happened to his Hagar. He knows that “while he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Sweet’s silvery voice came back to him: ‘Who’d he leave behind?’” (332). Finally, Milkman symbolically accepts responsibility for his actions, acknowledging “it was his fault, and Pilate knew it” (332) and physically accepting responsibility by taking the shoebox filled with Hagar’s hair as a reminder of what his actions had cost. For the first time, Milkman seems truly concerned about the affects his actions have had on others.

At the novel’s close, Milkman is driving Pilate back to Shalimar to bury her father’s bones. When Guitar’s bullet misses Milkman and strikes Pilate, he once again takes on the role of nurturer, singing to her as she dies. However, had Milkman really become in tune with the feminine, wouldn’t he have avoided placing Pilate in such danger in the first place? He knows Guitar has been tracking his movements, and would it not be reasonable to assume that Milkman and Pilate’s trip to Shalimar just might make Guitar suspicious? Morrison seems to suggest that although a blending of gender attributes is possible, it is not an easy stance to maintain; humans are creatures of habit, and habits that are supported by centuries of cultural approval would of course be even more difficult to overcome. Milkman’s difficulty in maintaining the
feminine world view is manifested in his admiration for Pilate at her death, for his 
admiration is still grounded in the masculine, at her ability to “fly” “without ever 
leaving the ground” (336).

This difficulty is further exemplified in the novel’s ending, a final (masculine) 
confrontation between Milkman and Guitar. “Over here, brother man!” Milkman 
shouts, claiming the masculine and emphasizing the connections the two men share. 
Guitar recognizes this with a twist of irony: “‘My man,’ he murmured to himself. ‘My 
main man’” (337). As Lee points out, “‘Brother’ and ‘man,’ commonly used by blacks 
as modes of address, join to affirm community and also to negate the long history of 
blacks being called ‘boys’ and Milkman having been one. Significantly, Milkman thus 
declares to Guitar his brotherhood, manhood, existence, and life” (70). Now, 
although Guitar puts his gun on the ground, the dialogue between the two is still 
spoken in terms of physical force. One of the men dies, but we do not which. As the 
narrator tells us, “it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the 
killing arms of his brother” (337).

Although critical opinion on the ambiguous ending has been divided, most 
view it as positive. Farrell contends that

not only does Milkman recognize and affirm female experience, . . . he 
actually lives it. Milkman becomes the “other,” the person left behind, as he 
sings to Pilate: “sugargirl don’t leave me here” (340). “Sugarman” in Pilate’s 
song has become “sugargirl” as the traditionally male trades places with the 
traditionally female. Milkman is now the nurturer as he cradles Pilate in his 
armp. . . . Milkman’s flight represents an acknowledgement and acceptance of
The novel's dominant metaphor of flying changes from a "flying away" to a "flying toward." In contrast to the black power movement's struggle to attain "manhood," the novel presents a journey to "personhood" and to community. (147)

Not all critics see the ending in such positive, loving, terms, however. Matus sees the final scene as "an act of confronting, surrendering, and soaring" (78), noting that the cost of Milkman's "freedom and flight is a woman's sanity and life" (81).

Similarly, Harris notes that "the success of Milkman's journey depends in large part on the string of female bodies, figuratively and literally, that he leaves along his path. . . . They become sacrifices on the alter of his possibilities" (107). Demtrakopoulos envisions the men's confrontation as a "final duel almost like matter and antimatter colliding" ("Interdependence" 94), arguing that Milkman does finally understand Pilate's lessons: "he leaps to wrestle his own shadow, the nihilism and narcissism of Guitar. He has already won" (99). However, if one has a "winner," doesn't that mean one also has a "loser"? Is this really a true departure from the either/or dialectic, the "us-against-them" mentality? The mere fact that most critics feel compelled to "pick a side" on the ending suggests to me that in spite of its ambiguity, the novel's ending does not leave us with a fully bigendered Milkman. Harris makes a valid point by noting that Milkman,

thorough his reflections and seeming changes of attitudes, follows Pilate. But the attraction to flying makes him confront Guitar in what may be a fatal end to the lessons he has just learned. In confronting Guitar, Milkman may be flying off and leaving a body again (Pilate has specifically asked him to
look after Reba), but he does so with a desire for commitment. . . . He does take Guitar with him; if their flight ends in death, it can be viewed as Milkman having saved Guitar from himself. . . . The death could also be viewed as vengeance . . . [but that] would mean that Milkman has adopted Guitar's eye-for-an-eye philosophy, which is unacceptable. . . What is clear from the final scene is that Milkman is thoroughly changed from the selfish little creature he started out to be; he has reevaluated himself and his relationship to his family, and he has progressed in healthy ways. (106-07)

The only problem with Harris' argument is that it posits Milkman as merely a sort of latter-day Pip from *Great Expectations*. Although Harris urges us to accept Milkman "as a heroic figure whose heroism can only be defined through dualistic, sometimes ambiguous actions" (88), I would argue his actions are not dualistic and ambiguous enough. If *Song of Solomon* were really to issue a direct challenge to the patriarchy and hegemony, Milkman would have had to have changed in a more concrete, provocative way. If Milkman does not survive his battle with Guitar, he cannot take on Pilate's role of teacher/mentor/guide for other generations, he cannot look after Reba, he cannot bring any lasting peace to his family or continue to grow himself. When Bjork argues that "we have once again come full circle in the novel" (107), I agree with the statement but not the sentiment. We have come full circle in that Milkman has not completely lived up to his name, a combination of "milk," symbolizing the maternal, life-giving, nurturing, and "man," the grown-up boy who is now a "man." A marginally bigendered Milkman allows Morrison to suggest that blindly accepting roles created by society or "trying on" culturally-approved
alternatives is a limiting habit, one which removes possibilities and reduces horizons. However, because the figure of Milkman does not overwhelm his community, he does not set into motion the community's efforts to arm itself against a perceived "threat." Because he is working from within the framework of his community, Milkman's disruption of culturally-acceptable gender roles has the chance to affect a change, subtle though it may be.

Bisexual sociologist Paula Rust proclaims that bisexuals have the potential "to radically alter the way we thing [sic] about not only gender and sexuality, but also the nature of power itself." In other words, since a belief in monosexuality and binary notions of gender are built into the very foundations of this society, the concept of bisexuality threatens the very structure of hetropatriarchy. (Goldman 177).

Morrison's Milkman suggests the possibility of successfully shifting the power away from hetropatriarchy or patriarchy.

This shift is repeated when we consider her treatment of the novel's female protagonist, Pilate. Morrison is obviously playing with gender roles in her characterization of Pilate, mixing both masculine and feminine attributes. Bjork sees her living the life "of an archetypal 'running man' . . . but unlike the 'running man' of history, Pilate does not fly away from responsibility; hers is a desired flight toward a communal consciousness, . . . which itself transcends the world's meanness and selfishness" (96-97) and contends that her "story indicates that she possesses the essences of the existential male hero" (89-96). Milkman's father has prevented his son
from knowing his aunt, so at first, Milkman thinks of her only as the “queer aunt” who has caused him to be teased by classmates (37).

Pilate’s name suggests that Morrison wants readers to view her as a sexually ambiguous character. The name suggests masculine attributes; the biblical Pilate was, of course, a male, and the word “pilot” is a term reserved for male fliers (females have been traditionally called “aviatrix”). Since so much of the novel focuses on men who “fly away” from their families, giving the lead female character a “male” name which refers to this act is no coincidence. However, unlike the male African Americans who leave their families, Pilate is the unifying force in hers, a role that is traditionally assigned to African-American females—the matriarch.

Patricia Hill Collins decries the controlling images of the mammy and the matriarch. The mammy is traditionally depicted as deferential and non-threatening, the quintessential nurturing mother. Clearly, Pilate does not fit this category, for although she is both a loving mother and grandmother, she is not “unable,” despite her “all-giving nature” to “do harm” (Collins 72). For example, when Reba is being beaten by a lover, Pilate slips up behind him with a knife and makes clear her intention to kill him if he persists.

But is Morrison merely presenting us with a newer version of the matriarch? Collins asks whether “as overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculate their lovers and husbands” (74)—or their daughter’s lovers? Collins declares that “the source of the matriarch’s failure is her inability to model appropriate gender behavior” (75). Most people learn proper gender behavior from their same-sex parents, but since Pilate’s mother died in childbirth, Pilate was afforded
no proper model. Perhaps that is why, from the moment of her birth, Pilate takes on some decidedly masculine characteristics. We are told that rather than being passively pushed out of her dead mother’s birth canal, Pilate “inched [her] way headfirst out of a still, silent, and indifferent cave of flesh, dragging her own cord and her own afterbirth behind her” (28). As Circe admits, Pilate “borned herself. . . . When she popped out you could have knocked me over. I hadn’t heard a heartbeat anywhere. She just came on out” (244). Later in her life, after the death of her father and the argument with her brother, Pilate seeks solace in several different black communities. However, as soon as people discover she does not have a navel, she is thrown out or abandoned.

Tired of being rejected by all the communities, she reinvents herself, starting by cutting her hair. When she finds her long-lost brother, Macon, he is so annoyed by her appearance—“shoelaces undone, a knitted cap pulled down over her forehead, bringing her foolish earring and sickening smell into the kitchen”—he attacks her: “why can’t you dress like a woman?” (20). Worse yet, Pilate’s method of supporting herself is by becoming the local moonshiner, clearly a job within the masculine realm.

In many ways, Pilate worships all that is male, yet by doing so she ironically places herself squarely within the feminine. Harper argues that the “stereotypic conception of femininity [is as] . . . a condition achieved through one’s legitimating recognition by an implicitly masculine subject” (185). Her desire to be legitimized by the male gaze is obvious in her need to search out and live near the brother who has disowned her, her unseemly devotion to her brother’s child, and her desire to “pay close attention to her mentor” (150)—her father’s ghost. Once again, Morrison is blending the gender borders, creating a character who defies easy categorization.
Her lack of traditional mothering distresses her brother, as Macon quickly notes that she seems “more interested in this first nephew of hers than she was in her own daughter, and even that daughter’s daughter” (19). Although Harris praises her “extranatural mothering role” (92), Pilate cannot be said to supervise her daughter and granddaughter too closely, although we do perhaps see her “extranatural mothering” in her excessively doting relationship with Hagar. The narrator tells us that Reba and Hagar’s “generosity was so wholehearted it looked like carelessness, and they did their best to satisfy every whim Hagar had” (92). Their desire to satisfy Hagar’s whims is not, of course, able to help Hagar when Milkman abandons her: “Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it” (307). Pilate’s reluctance or inability to teach Hagar the possibilities of challenging gender roles may have ultimately contributed to Hagar’s attempt to embody that feminine ideal in its most fervent form, that of the white, European standard. This, as Morrison suggests, is an effort doomed to failure. As Awkward notes, Morrison herself blames the failure of Pilate’s family on its absence of men; in “Rootedness,” she says it is “a disability we must be on guard against for the future—the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female” (qtd. in Awkward 488). However, what Pilate is able to give is that which is most needed by all individuals: unconditional love. Hagar’s funeral
illuminates this all-encompassing love for the dead granddaughter in Pilate's poignant, heart-rending cry—"And she was loved!" (319).

Although Ault argues that "a bisexual feminism, as seen in the deployment of politicized bisexual identities in everyday life, might produce a unique set of radical meanings" outside standard hetero/homosexual meanings (214), Awkward explains Morrison's rejection of that deviation:

Morrison rejects the feminist idea(l) of exclusively female communities as the best means of maximizing possibilities of black female psychic and emotional health. . . . Clearly, for Morrison, black female psychic health cannot be achieved without the cooperative participation of both females and males in its creation and nurturance. Indeed, male participation helps to provide the novice female with a sense of "balance" between "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male" without which the gendered and tribal health is, for Morrison, quite unlikely. (489)

Awkward argues that "Morrison's appropriations of the monomyth and of Afro-American sacred narrative are motivated by . . . rupturing, delegitimizing impulses" (489). Morrison achieves this delegitimizing rupture by refusing to offer readers a "pat" answer to the questions of how far one should be defined by one's gender. What we have in this novel is a community of women sacrificing their lives for the men they love and being destroyed for their sacrifices. Pilate's need to sacrifice herself (and perhaps, by extension, her granddaughter) can be viewed as stereotypically feminine. But self-sacrifice has also traditionally been ascribed to male behavior, as soldiers are told they are sacrificing their lives for the good of the country.
Pilate’s comment that “it’ll be a woman save his life” (140) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—at the cost of her own life. Although many critics argue Morrison is doing this to show the harm the patriarchy wrecks upon women, she seems to suggest that adopting a pure matriarchy is no better. “Pilate’s line neither thrives nor survives. Her descendants become less independent and self-possessed” (Mathus 84). R. J. Butler, however, contends that Pilate is a success, “one of the very few women in American literature capable of leading the picaresque life which is given so easily to the male protagonists of our literary traditions” (75). Nevertheless, Morrison shows that she must pay too heavy a price for this “success”: the destruction of her family and herself. Harris maintains that “her victimization . . . might have its worth in the larger picture of familial and communal good” and that “Pilate is triumphant in that, by sacrificing her own life, she will bring to an end the sequence of events, both historical and contemporary, that have divided her family and caused so much grief in it” (115).

Some might be tempted to level the charge that Pilate is merely an incarnation of the matriarch stereotype. After all, she takes on a “man’s” job and rears two children without benefit of masculine assistance. As bell hooks notes, whites “used the matriarchy myth to impress upon the consciousness of all Americans that black women were masculinized, castrating, ball-busters” (80-81). African-American women writers are presented with a dilemma: to avoid giving credence to that offensive stereotype, should they then avoid any characterization that might be construed as maintaining it, thereby narrowing their artist’s palette? Is this not akin to refusing to eat watermelon simply because of the racial stereotypes that have built up around that innocent action? I suspect that Morrison’s portrayal of Pilate is her appropriation and
subsequent revisal of the matriarch myth. In Pilate, we have a strong, centered, “masculine” woman who is still simultaneously able to express an unmitigated love for both her own child and granddaughter and the all the people of the world: “I wished I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (336). By having Pilate embrace the full spectrum of human behavior, Morrison demonstrates her unwillingness to have her creative choices limited and in the process creates a spellbinding, unforgettable character who casts a long shadow in this novel.

In a similar way, Morrison continues to explore the relationship between the individual and the community, refusing to choose one over the other. In this issue, as in the gender issue, Morrison hints that there is no one “true” answer; people like Guitar who choose absolutes threaten their self-integrity as well as their community’s.

In Song of Solomon, Morrison plays with rigid gender-roles and thereby undermines them. By letting go of binary oppositions, these two characters become transcendent and larger than life. She seems to be suggesting that there is no “easy” alternative to the either/or dichotomies. By creating two characters who take on both masculine and feminine characteristics, Morrison allows her bigendered Milkman and Pilate to represent a “concept of bisexuality [which] could function to disrupt and further open a paradigm that depends of binary oppositions” (Goldman 177).

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1 She approves of what she calls Brenner’s persuasive argument that the novel “sets Milkman up as a hero, only to undermine and reject the sexism of traditional Western notions of the heroic” but chides him for his “insensitive and unpersuasive reading” of Hagar. She finds Michael Awkward’s article “the most insightful piece to date on the topic of gender in Song of Solomon” when he argues that Morrison’ novel both rejects and “affirms aspects of both [traditional monomyth and feminism]” (133-34); however,
she continues, Awkward also failed to take into consideration the cultural and sociopolitical milieu during which the novel was written.

2 See, for example, Valerie Smith’s “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon,” Wilfred Samuels’ “Liminality and the Search for Self in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon,” and Peter Bruck’s “Returning to One’s Roots: The Motif of Searching and Flying in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon.”

3 Although Farrell agrees with most of Awkward’s observations, she notes that by considering Morrison’s appropriation in the terms of the socio-political times during which it was written, we can gain further insight into her use of the myth. As mentioned earlier, Farrell draws attention to the Black Power movement which Morrison references in the character of Guitar. For Farrell, Morrison’s theme is the desire “to emphasize both the needs of the individual and the need for a unified community. One should not be pursued to the exclusion of the other; the two must always exist in a dialectical relationship” (144). But, Farrell notes, Morrison realizes the difficulties inherent in a dialectical relationship; rather than repeating the hegemonic either/or dichotomy of standard myth, Morrison refuses to “substitute a simplistic or romanticized notion of wholeness and community” (136).

4 Demetrakopoulos notes “the masculine narcissism” (91) seen in Macon and echoed in Milkman and says he is sent on the journey “to undergo the death of the masculine ego to become a complete person at only age thirty-one” (93). Weinstein contends he is sent “when his model of manhood would equate identity with unfettered potency, and when everywhere he find himself economically cut off, racially and sexually stereotyped, a participant only in others’ schemas” (64). Furman similarly notes Milkman’s frustration at his narrowed life choices, which Furman attributes to limits imposed by his “gender-determined perspectives” (35). Duvall argues that Milkman is sent on his quest to divest himself of his “male ego . . . forged in the structures of a patriarchal society” (111).

5 Similarly, Bjork notes that “hunting as the traditional symbol for brotherhood and belonging frames and underscores Milkman’s sudden awakening to his essential connection to other people” (105).

6 Now, they can “respect him at a mutual, horizontal level rather than a hierarchical one” (Harris 100). As Bjork notes, “Hunting as the traditional symbol for brotherhood and belonging frames and underscores Milkman’s sudden awakening to his essential connection to other people” (105).

7 “Although Milkman returns from his quest having experienced a wonderful reciprocal relationship with Sweet, his new-found awareness of female needs and entitlements seems superficial” (Mathus 83).

8 Bjork agrees, saying, “Milkman does not fly away [:] he leaps in acknowledgement of personal kinship and brotherhood. He realizes that only in commitment is he free. . . . His flight forever sets in motion an open and necessary dialectic between a communal spirit and a factional reality” (109). Furman declares that Milkman’s “tremulous offer of himself” demonstrates that “Milkman has evolved to the point that he values love more than he values the physical world” (41) and that “it is Milkman who draws closest to achieving genuine universal love” (41).
CHAPTER 4

*Tar Baby*: Mired in the Tar of Masculinity/Femininity

In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison avowed that gender itself is not an important issue at stake in her third novel, *Tar Baby*; gender only within the context of race is the problem, she contended: "There is a serious question about black male and black female relationships in the twentieth century. I just think that the argument as always turned on something it should not turn on: gender. I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness" (147). According to Morrison, the novel’s protagonists, Jadine and Son “had no problems as far as men and women are concerned. . . . It was not because he was a man and she was a woman that conflict arose between them” (147). With this declaration, Morrison seems to urge her readers to accept a rather simplistic view of the function of gender. However, as already noted, coming to an understanding of gender is never simple nor easy; Jadine and Son face conflicts that any male/female couple faces. Nevertheless, as Morrison herself notes, the addition of race to the formula of gender does further complicate the issue. In spite of her protestation to the contrary, the characters Jadine and Son *do* have a problem as far as men and women are concerned, and that problem is in defining themselves within the rigid construction of being either male or female and then applying that definition within the context of a relationship. With *Tar Baby*, Morrison presents us with two characters who can be viewed in part as stereotypical representations of their genders; however, in some ways, these two characters can also be said to be a reexamination of hegemonic notions of gendered role-playing in relationships.
On the surface, Jadine would seem to be the personification of the stereotypical female. She is a twenty-five-year old black model. Obviously, in order to be a successful model, a woman must represent the hegemonic culture’s notion of “beautiful”; although a few models with distinctly African features have succeeded in the narrow world of modeling, especially in the more “daring” agencies, the majority are expected to fit the white European standard for beauty.\(^1\) Morrison suggests that Jadine’s features are not strongly African,\(^2\) and we are told she has succeeded well enough in modeling to have her face grace both *Vogue* and *Elle* magazines. Bouson notes that Jadine’s light skin places her in the category of “ultrafeminine” (117). She is also well educated, having received a degree in art history from the Sorbonne. Jadine appears to be the living embodiment of everything any woman would wish to be: “the handsome raucous men wanted to marry, live with, support, fund and promote her. Smart and beautiful women wanted to be her friend, confidante, lover, neighbor, guest, playmate, host, servant, student, or simply near” (47). Morrison never suggests Jadine’s allure is the result of some great inner beauty; in fact, Jadine is at first portrayed as self-centered and lacking compassion. Only because she is beautiful, charming, and witty, do others vie for her attention. Nevertheless, Morrison takes her readers beyond Jadine’s seemingly polished perfection to suggest, as Robinson does in his poem “Richard Cory” (which Morrison cites in the novel\(^3\)) that attempting to maintain perfection exacts a heavy toll both on the icon and on those who would maintain it. Throughout the novel, Jadine discovers that in order to maintain her precarious position on the pedestal of femininity, she must limit herself in a variety of ways.
Jadine is struggling to define herself. She is at a crossroad in her life, finished with her education but uncertain where to turn next. She’s been living the free, exciting life of a jet-setting model in Europe, but now that she has received a marriage proposal from one of her many admirers, she’s faced with the need to make a decision about her future. In addition to questioning her future, an unsettling event in Paris makes Jadine question her very conception of her racial identity.

While at a grocery store shopping for supplies for a party to celebrate her degree and her magazine layouts, Jadine is confronted by the sight of a “woman’s woman—that mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty” (46). In spite of immediately recognizing the woman’s superiority by mythic standards, Jadine begins to size up the imposing woman through the hegemonic culture’s narrow standard of femininity; she is “much too tall” with “too much hip, too much bust” and “skin like tar against the canary yellow dress” (45); in other words, the woman seems to embody too many markers of black femininity, unlike popular Eurocentric models, who are allowed to be tall (as long as they are willing to submissively crouch in a photo shoot), narrow-hipped and athletic (not womanly), and light-skinned4. Morrison presents here an alternative to the Eurocentric standard of beauty, an “African Queen” who is stately and confident. Unlike models, who must survive by constantly putting themselves in front of the camera’s eye and soliciting the world’s attention, this woman makes no attempt to call attention to herself, but her mere presence commands awe and respect from those around her. Jadine, like the other shoppers, is transfixed by the woman. Morrison further underscores the woman’s womanliness when the woman purchases only three eggs, pagan symbols of fertility, which she held “aloft between earlobe and shoulder” (45). Jadine’s admiration for the woman is
destroyed, however, when the woman, leaving with all eyes upon her, “turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below” (46). Here, once again, Morrison is making a reference to the poem “Richard Cory,” specifically the line “we people on the pavement looked at him:/ He was a gentleman from sole to crown, / Clean favored, and imperially slim.” Unlike Richard Cory, the quintessential “gentleman” who allowed himself to be worshipped, this woman of regal bearing has contempt for such gap-mouthed adulation of the “people on the pavement.” By referencing this poem, Morrison is calling into question the Eurocentric assumption that white standards are the only ones by which objects and people are to be valued. Morrison’s African queen is not “imperially slim,” and she refuses to act like a “gentlewoman” (which becomes obvious later in her response to Jadine’s stare). The woman in the yellow dresses recognizes that Jadine is not able to respect her within the proper context, for Jadine’s admiration is tainted with a Eurocentric gaze. Through this fully female, fully African character, Morrison is able to chip away at Jadine’s limited perspective. This character illuminates Morrison’s ability to “disrupt . . . traditional Western ideological confines and modify] patriarchal inscriptions” (Rigney qtd. in Payant 1). Jadine is able to acknowledge to herself that “she had wanted that woman to like and respect her” (47), but Jadine responds to the woman’s gesture of contempt in a thoroughly Eurocentric, phallocentric manner: “you mumble ‘bitch,’ but the hunger never moves, never closes” (46). The narrator suggests (albeit in the form of the vague second person plural “you”) that Jadine hurls the epithet dreaded by African-American women, the word that conjures up the image of the castrating, castigating matriarch/mammy, “bitch.” This word also has
another connotation, one which is of particular concern to Jadine—the literal one of a female dog. This connotation ties into another stereotype about African-American women, what Collins refers to as the “controlling image” of the “Jezebel,” the over-sexed women desperate to rut with whatever happens their way. In her portrayal of this woman, Morrison plays with these two images—the mammy and the Jezebel—calling forth the stereotypes and simultaneously undermining them, for Collins notes that the stereotypical representation of the Jezebel’s increased sexuality was linked to the slaveowners’ desire for increased fertility; “slaveowners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and Mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery” (77).

Morrison’s African woman is directly linked in this scene to fertility via the three eggs; however, she is buying the eggs, not producing them, which suggests control rather than exploitation, and her contemptuous reaction to Jadine’s objectifying gaze—spitting on the sidewalk—demonstrates her indifference to the Eurocentric standards by which she knows Jadine is judging her, for “ladies,” of course, do not spit.

Jadine’s use of the epithet “bitch” signals the dog imagery that permeates the novel, imagery that represents Jadine’s discomfort with her own sexual identity as a Black woman. Although Bouson suggests Jadine’s discomfort with the African woman in the store is a result of her being forced to confront “suppressed aspects of her identity: that is, female nurturing and maternal parts” (123), this notion presupposes as fact that nurturing and maternity are indeed inherent in Jadine’s personality, an idea which is perhaps based on Bouson’s culturally-acceptable gender models. Bouson does not seem to consider than perhaps not all women do harbor these feminine aspects. In fact, the text suggests that Jadine as made a conscious effort to keep these aspects from becoming a part of her
personality, as we can see later in the novel, when Jadine is manhandled by Son, whom Bouson describes as a “hypermasculinized black male rapist” (114), an American hiding from the law. He enters her room, uninvited, while she is admiring the way she looks, nude, in a mink coat. He grabs her wrists and forces her to face away from him as he pushes his body next to hers, like

One dog sniffing at the hindquarters of another, and the female, her back to him, not moving, but letting herself be sniffed, letting him nuzzle her asshole as the man had nuzzled hers, the bitch never minding that the male never looked in her face [just] . . . smelled her ass and stuck his penis in, humping and jerking and grinding away while she stood there bearing, actually bearing his whole weight as he pummeled around inside her and other dogs too, waiting, circling until the engaged dog was through and then they would mount her also in the street in broad daylight no less. (123-24)

We learn that Jadine’s reaction to Son’s unwelcome advances is linked to an experience in her childhood. When she was twelve, she saw dogs copulating in the street and was shocked by the reaction of “the retired postman coming out of his house in his undershirt shouting get that bitch out of here. She’s in heat. Lock that bitch up. Every goddamn dog in town’ll be over here and he went back inside to get a mop handle to run the males off and crack the bitch over the back and send her home” (124). In this incident, Jadine sees sexuality “blamed” on the female “who had done nothing but ‘be in heat’ which she couldn’t help but which was her fault just the same so it was she who was beaten and cracked over the head and spine with the mop handle and made to run away” (124) and is therefore confronted with an devastatingly negative image of female sexuality.
This event traumatizes Jadine, for she remembers that she “felt sorry for her and went looking for her to see if she was hurt” (124). Instead of siding with the man who considered the “bitch” bad, Jadine sympathizes with the dog, whom she views as victim. However, when she finally finds the dog, it “was behind the gas station standing very quietly while another dog sniffed her ass embarrassing me in the sunlight” (124). This “embarrasses” Jadine because in the previous incident, Jadine had viewed the dog as the unwilling victim of the males; however, now that the female dog is standing “quietly” while yet another dog approaches her, Jadine, too, is in part “blaming” the dog for its sexual nature. The impact of this event carries on to her adult life; throughout the novel, whenever a man makes emotional or physical advances on Jadine, she “pulls out the leashes” to give herself control. Instead of being the “bitch” who is controlled by her sexual desires, Jadine becomes the person at the other end of the leash, the person in control. In other words, Jadine is attempting to assert agency by refusing the two diametrically opposed gender-assigned roles of Jezebel and passive victim (virgin/whore). If a woman refuses to play the role of virgin (nurturing and maternal), can we really argue that she is merely “suppressing” these aspects of her personality? If so, must we not also argue that she is “suppressing” her “whorish” aspects? Although Bouson’s observation that Tar Baby “crystallizes black middle-class anxieties about female sexual desire” (115) is a valid one, to insist that Jadine suppresses maternal aspects that all women are inherently maternal and nurturing, a controversial notion that is still part of a lively debate within feminist circles and scientific research.

The fact that Jadine is willing to hurl this specific epithet at the “womanly woman” shows the depth of her own anger and fear, emotions she reacts to with self-hatred and
projects upon the woman in the yellow dress, who makes her feel "lonely and inauthentic" (48). However, by using the language of women’s oppressors, by utilizing the label she most abhors having applied to herself, Jadine ironically demonstrates her close alignment with the very culture that denigrates her and in effect acquiesces with the hegemony’s definition of expected gendered behavior patterns. The black woman in the yellow dress, with her three eggs, symbolizes an extreme version of femininity through fertility, an extreme which Jadine wishes to reject in favor of its opposite: the detached, unattainable, air-brushed sexual fantasy girl/model who does not threaten with maternity, the female over whom the males can drool but never dare to touch. Thus, she can keep her own sexual passions at bay and maintain control but at the great price of denying the normal sexual feelings that many women experience. Throughout the novel, Jadine finds herself being told to choose one of these “sides,” as though no other possibilities were open, just as she feels she is being asked to choose between the white world and the black world. Consistently, Jadine rejects the sexualized maternal/nurturing “earth-mother” role, which she associates with blackness via the Jezebel image, as is evident when she allows Son to talk her into returning to his boyhood home of Eloe.

In rural Eloe, Jadine feels estranged from the townspeople and resents being sent to the homes of women she doesn’t know while Son visits his father. She makes little attempt to socialize with the townswomen, preferring to maintain her distance by taking out her camera and shooting photos of people instead of engaging them in conversation; one gets the feeling Jadine is documenting her progress with the “natives,” people with whom she feels she has nothing in common. With her camera, she is also pointedly reminding the locals that she is an educated, artistic outsider. In other words, Jadine
“others” herself from the women of Eloé to distance herself from them. When Son tells her she needs to sleep by herself at Rosa’s house to avoid offending the sensibilities of the community, Jadine refuses and convinces Son to sneak in with her at night. After they make love (lovemaking that is competitive because Jadine has recently heard that Son’s dead wife had “the best pussy in Florida,” making Jadine feel she must outdo the dead wife “and surpass her legendary gifts” [257]), Jadine has a vision of the town’s women and even her own aunt and her dead mother and the woman in yellow coming into her room and, she feels, judging her:

They each pulled out a breast and showed it to her. Jadine started to tremble. They stood around in the room . . . revealing one breast and then two and Jadine was shocked. . . . “I have breasts, too,” she said or thought or willed, “I have breasts, too.” But they didn’t believe her. They just held their own higher and pushed their own farther out and looked at her. All of them revealing both their breasts except the woman in yellow. She did something more shocking—she stretched out a long arm and showed Jadine her three big eggs. It scared her so, she began to cry. (259)

Through this vision, Jadine confronts the fears she feels regarding her status as a single black woman. She is cognizant of the nurturing role she is expected to play and the great amount of pressure put upon her by Son and her family to play that role. We again see her reluctance to embrace the image of the fertile Jezebel, but she also does not want to become the Jezebel’s antithesis, Son’s model of the perfect black woman, the “good” woman who stands before the food-laden tables at the church. Jadine sees these women as submissive martyrs. Readers can sympathize with Jadine while at the same time
recognize that her harsh view of the women Son loves is tainted by her Eurocentrism; there is more than one way to “read” these women. Son wants to offer her an alternative reading, to encourage her to understand what he sees as the true strength of these women: “It took all the grown-up strength you had to stay there and stay alive and keep a family together. They didn’t know about state aid in Eloe; there were no welfare lines in Eloe” (268). However, Jadine focuses on the personal sacrifices these women are expected to make for the good of their families and communities, sacrifices which Morrison’s men can avoid by leaving—and still be respected as men.5

When Son measures Jadine up against these women, it is she who falls short, for he believes she does not understand his respect for these women; Jadine “kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior. He couldn’t understand that. . . . Anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come out of north Florida” (268). When Jadine doesn’t fit Son’s definition of what a woman should be, he sees her as a bitch who “barks” at him. Jadine’s refusal to play the gender role he wants her to quickly causes a rift in their relationship (as does his refusal to play the gender role she wants him to play). When Son tries to fantasize about marrying Jadine and fathering children, he is unable to ignore her disdain for his way of life and the values he holds dear. Waiting for her to come to him in New York but fearing she won’t, he remembers how she acted in front of Valerian, her white benefactor, trying to keep him happy at the expense of everyone else in the household. To himself, he berates her for her different way of seeing things: “the mocking voice, the superior managerial, administrative, clerk-in-a-fucking-loan-office tone she took. Gatekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap,
who called a black man old enough to be her father ‘Yardman’ and who couldn’t give a shit who he himself was” (219-20). Son is clearly placing Jadine in the category of castrating matriarch, and even though he says he is not a believer in the white hegemony’s patriarchal, materialistic values, he is obviously threatened by Jadine’s ability to enter that world with ease. Son finally calms himself by focusing on the “wind chimes” he believes lurk “underneath her efficiency and know-it-all sass” (220). At this point, the readers can see that some of Jadine’s fears in settling down with a man are indeed well-grounded; Son is clearly in agreement with the woman in the yellow dress and the women standing before the church tables, and he is just as willing to try to change her as she is later in her attempts to change him.

Jadine and Son’s relationship is not particularly healthy. Each of them is determined to change the other. Son is every bit as miserable in New York as Jadine was in Elo. Just as Son pushes Jadine to emulate his idea of the perfect woman, Jadine attempts to mold Son into the hegemonic model of masculinity—the well-educated provider. Son is an example of what Bouson terms “the shame-pride dialectic” in representations of black masculinity; he is at once possessed of “‘authentic’ African and folk-heroic qualities” and is also the “uncivilized and unclean Other,” the “lawless ‘bad nigger’” (119). Jadine is simultaneously repulsed and attracted to the dueling images. She cannot wait to “show him off: her fine frame, her stag, her man” (223). The use of the word “stag” here is particularly troubling, as it is uncomfortably close to one favored by slave owners when referring to their male “stock”: buck. Jadine feeds off his masculinity, and perhaps for the first time she is able to “let go the leash” and enjoy how he makes her feel “so rutish” (223). She relishes sex with Son, embracing his “wildness and fumbling,
his corny unself-conscious joy [that] was like blue-sky water” (225). In fact, Son is such a man’s man that he makes Jadine’s bisexual friend Betty fear she “couldn’t get back into the closet fast enough when Son was in the room” (223).

Nevertheless, for Jadine testosterone alone is not enough for her ideal man. He must also be educated, so Jadine begins sending off for college catalogs and urges Son to pick a profession. Son is every bit as resistant to Jadine’s plans for him as she was to his. Jadine fears being subsumed by the “earth mother” image, and Son fears “selling out” to the white hegemonic culture and tells Jadine, “I can’t hassle nobody that looks like me, or you either” (263). Jadine tries to brush away his concerns with a dismissive, “Oh, shit. There’s other kinds of law” (263), a statement which she later modifies to defend her reluctance to play the role of dutiful daughter to Ondine and Sydney: “There are other ways to be a woman, Nanadine” (281). Her refusal to legitimize Son’s concerns serves to escalate their anger at one another, and they end up in a brawl. When they continue insulting each other days later, Son dangles Jadine out a window and tells her that her education is worthless because all it really accomplished was isolating Jadine from her culture and her own people:

the truth is that whatever you learned in those college that didn’t include me ain’t shit. What did they teach you about me? What tests did they give? Did they tell you what I was like, did they tell you what was on my mind? . . . If they didn’t teach you that, then they didn’t teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don’t know nothing about yourself. And you don’t know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. You find out about me, you educated nitwit! (265)
Son views Jadine as a sell-out to the white culture that continues to denigrate African-Americans, making “exceptions” only for the light-skinned beauties like Jadine. Although he makes many valid points which Jadine would do well to consider—telling her the names of Valerian’s black employees and advising her to treat them as human beings, not servants, and urging her to pay more attention to the needs of her aunt and uncle—his use of brute force to “convince” her undermines his message and allows Jadine to focus more on playing the victim rather than understanding his point of view. Their relationship is doomed because each seeks to “rescue” the other; “she thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building” (269), and “he thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old” (269). Morrison summarizes the conflict between the two on a Afrocentric scale: “Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (269). Son refuses to see Jadine’s resistance to his point of view as originating in a gender conflict; he does not seem to understand that she views herself as a woman fighting to make her way in a man’s world, not as a black woman against a white world. From his point of view, however, everything boils down to race, and he is infuriated by her inability to see their conflict in these terms. He tells her, “You turn little black babies into little white ones; you turn your black brothers into white brothers” (270), and she responds with “There is nothing any of us can do about the past but make our own lives better, that’s all I’ve been trying to help you do. That is the only revenge, for us
to get over" (271). Jadine feels that Son is wanting to reduce her to a baby-making "earth-mother" revenge factory, so she finally gives up on Son and flees New York, returning to the tropical island where her aunt and uncle work.

However, lest the reader be tempted to side completely with Jadine in her rejection of the feminine "earth-mother" role, Morrison complicates the issue by bringing in yet another facet of the feminine role, that of the obedient daughter. And this time, the "lesson" comes not from the testosterone-driven Son but Jadine's own family. After Jadine's parents died, her aunt and uncle reared her while they worked in Valerian's house. Their absolute love for Jadine is reflected in the way they speak of her and eagerly anticipate her visits. They are proud of her accomplishments, both physical and intellectual. Ondine vicariously receives pleasure through Jadine's success in modeling: "My face wasn't in every magazine. Yours was. Prettiest thing I ever saw. Made those white girls disappear" (40). Later in the novel, we learn that Ondine and Sydney spent most of their savings on educating Jadine, although Jadine erroneously believes that Valerian was her sole benefactor. Jadine is not anxious to repay her debt to them. After the terrible holiday dinner in which Ondine and Sydney verbally attack and are attacked by Valerian and Margaret, their position with them is threatened. Instead of staying with her aunt and uncle until matters are worked out, Jadine flees for the safety of New York and the chance to play housemate with Son. Like Sula, Jadine resists playing the role of dutiful daughter when she ignores Ondine and Sydney's plight and chooses the masculine prerogative, flight. However, although readers may not have been entirely sympathetic to Sula's grandmother, Eva, we find it difficult not to side with Ondine and Sydney, who have sacrificed much for Jadine, especially since they have no children of their own.
Jadine’s refusal to help them seems selfish and even cruel. Jadine’s masculine flight forces them to try to deal with Valerian as best they can. When she later decides to break off the relationship with Son while she is New York, she continues to play with the masculine role, this time by leaving Son. She returns to the island, for “now she felt lean and male, having left quickly with no peeping back just in case [emphasis in original]” (275). She continues to deny any responsibility for taking care of Ondine and Sydney, for once she is on the island with her aunt and uncle, all she can think is, “Please don’t need me now, not now. I can’t parent now. I cannot be needed now. Another time, please” (280). Her refusal to face the reality of her aunt and uncle’s shaky position is apparent when she has the gall to chide them for remaining with the Streets. She tells Ondine that she and Sydney should “choose” to “work other places or not at all” (280). Ondine finally cannot continue to withhold the fact that they have sacrificed all for Jadine. Hurt by her suspicion that Jadine has returned merely to pick up the fur coat she’d left in her rush to escape the island, Ondine finally makes claim to the debt she feels Jadine owes them even as she protests there is no debt. Ondine tells her, “Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can’t never learn how to be a woman. . . . All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain careful way about people older than you are” (281). Although it could be argued that Ondine is urging Jadine to fulfill the gender expectations of the “good girl,” her appeal can also be seen as an attempt to teach Jadine about the importance of community; in other words, she is trying to teach Jadine to see herself as Jadine-within-the-community rather than Jadine-within-herself. It is not difficult to imagine Ondine giving the same lecture to a son, for essentially, Ondine is arguing that children have a debt of respect and compassion to their
providers. Judylyn Ryan asserts that Ondine’s appeal to Jadine emphasizes “the symbiotic relationship between any generation and its elders” (611). Jadine, however, rejects Ondine’s protestations of not requiring anything from her and accuses her of wanting her to parent them. Ondine replies, “I am not asking you that. I’m just saying what a daughter is. A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her. . . . What I want from you is what I want for you. I don’t want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours” (281). Jadine ignores the pain in Ondine’s revelation and delivers her aunt the ultimate insult: “I don’t want to be . . . like you. Wait. Don’t look at me like that. I’m being honest with you now and you have to listen! I don’t want to learn how to be the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want to be that kind of woman” (282). Once again, Jadine feels as though she is being asked to choose between two diametrically opposed roles, “good girl” or “bad girl,” seeing no possibility for any sort of middle ground.

Although this tirade devastates Ondine, she does try to understand Jadine’s feelings and attempts to modify her own views, later defending Jadine when Sydney declares, “She didn’t do well by us, Ondine” (283).

The novel ends with Jadine flying back to Paris, leaving her dispute with her aunt and uncle unresolved and putting as much distance between herself and Son as possible. It is important to note that Jadine leaves on an airplane, a symbol in Morrison’s novels of male prerogative. Morrison further plays on this gender-shifting by juxtaposing Jadine’s exit from the island with a description of the island’s lush greenery and its female-led ant colonies, describing Jadine as a “soldier ant” who doesn’t “have time for dreaming. They are women and have much to do,” although, as Jadine admits it would be “so very hard to
forget the man who fucked like a star” (292). Craig Werner observes that Jadine’s return to Paris can be viewed as an act of strength rather than a cowardly retreat: “She determines to confront the repressed elements of her is-ness: her funky ‘animal’ passion . . . and the ‘night women’ who reassert the repressed history of black women.

Significantly, Jadine hopes to begin again in Paris; she realizes the impossibility of attaining safety through withdrawal” (165). Through Jadine, Morrison shows just how difficult it is to navigate through a culture that demands its members declare “sides”: are you black or white? A man or a woman? Although Jadine tells herself that there are other choices available, she is bewildered as to how to forge something new. Even though she fights against the impulse to define herself in oppositional terms to others, she falls into that trap over and over again. Like Richard Cory, who “one day went home and put a bullet through his head,” Jadine declines to join the “people on the pavement” and instead commits symbolic suicide by leaving behind all who would love her and make claims upon her.

Son also demonstrates the anxiety created by trying to find one’s place within oppositional gender roles. At times, Son is depicted within a feminine framework. Erickson notes that the novel begins with female/mothering imagery concerning Son and his “water birth” (304). However, Son is also at time maleness incarnate. We are introduced to his maleness in the novel’s very first word: “he.” Son is at the railing of the “masculine” ship H.M.S. Konigsgaarten, looking out at the “girlish white cruisers” (3). He is so masculine, in fact, that the ship “Queen of France blushed a little in the lessening light and lowered her lashes before his gaze” (3). He jumps ship and finds himself battling the feminine sea that pushes him with its “hand of an insistent woman”(4). Later, the
“water-lady cupped him in the palm of her hand, and nudged him out to sea” (5). Finally able to extricate himself from the feminine world of water, Son is able to swim to a nearby boat, climb in, and hide onboard until the ship lands on Valerian’s island. Terry Otten calls Son “criminal and hero,” two words often associated with males, and describes him as the (phallic) serpent in the Garden of Eden (107).

Morrison next draws our attention to his race. When Maragaret finally discovers that Son has been hiding in her closet, she runs to tell the others, but all she can say in her fear and excitement is “Black” (79). When Sydney investigates, he returns with “a black man with dreadlock hair,” and “the black man looked at Valerian” (80). Repeatedly, in referring to Son, Morrison couples the word “black” with “man,” suggesting that Son’s gender identity is inseparable from his racial identity. This is, perhaps, the root of the trouble between Jadine and Son, for Son wants Jadine to be more feminine which, for him, would necessarily mean she would have to be more black. This is exemplified in his fantasies concerning her when he sneaks into her bedroom as she sleeps, and he tries to “control” her dreams:

He had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her . . . the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line . . . while children scooped walnuts up off the ground and handed them to her. (119)

Son wants to phallically “insert” his dreams while she “lies still” and takes on his vision of “fat black ladies.” Ryan recognizes that “while the conflict of genders may originate in
cultural illness, the depiction of that illness in *Tar Baby* is both sexualized and gender-inflected. . . [Son’s desire to “insert” his dreams] reveal[s] the gendered aspects of this conflict” (602). For Son, gender and racial identity are one and the same, and for Son, a good black woman is a passive black woman. He makes this clear in his treatment of Jadine.

Son’s first long conversation occurs when he comes into her room unexpectedly as she comes out of the shower. Although she is annoyed with his rudeness, she makes an attempt to talk with him. She tells him about her life as a model and shows him pictures of herself in magazines. When he realizes she might refuse his dreams of black ladies watching pie tables and instead might try to “press her dreams of gold and cloisonne and honey-colored silk into him” (120), he insults her by asking how much “dick. That you had to suck, I mean, to get all that gold and be in the movies. Or was it pussy?” (120). He then tells her she’s a “little white girl” (121). Jadine understands Son’s point of view immediately, for she warns him against “pulling that black-woman-white-woman shit” and threatens him for trying “to get away with telling [her] what a black woman is or ought to be” (121). When Son insists, “I can tell you,” Jadine returns with an insult traditionally used by whites against blacks, calling him an “ugly barefoot baboon” (121). This same insult is repeated later by Margaret when she calls Son a gorilla. Interestingly, when the insult comes from a white woman’s lips, Jadine is offended; her “neck prickled at the description. She had volunteered nigger—but not gorilla” (129). In spite of her resistance, Son’s message is starting to invade her own thoughts, for she realizes how terrible this insult sounds, especially coming out of a white person’s mouth. Son may not be able to insert his dreams into Jadine, but he is, in some measure, inserting his world
view into hers; Jadine refuses to play the race game with Margaret and reminds her that "if he'd been white we would still have been scared" (129). Son’s preoccupation with Jadine’s racial identity is manifested strongly enough that even Gideon picks up on it; he asks Son, “Your first yalla?” and then advises him to “look out. It’s hard for them not to be white people.” Son tries to defend Jadine by arguing, “She’s not a yalla . . . . Just a little light” (155). That Son feels he has to “defend” Jadine’s skin color indicates clearly just how important the issue is to him. Harper’s argument on masculinity and blackness certainly seems to describe Son’s vision of himself; in order to be a black man, Son feels he must be a masculine man, and in order for Jadine to be a black woman, she has to want to receive validation through the gaze of the masculine black man. Son resents Jadine’s appeal to a predominantly white audience for her validation; he is determined to shift her gaze to himself.

Morrison continues to portray Son in a mix of feminine and hypermasculine terms. We learn that he had enjoyed hiding in the house because “it became his, sort of. A nighttime possession complete with a beautiful sleeping woman” (138). We learn that during his relationship with Jadine, he nurtures her so completely that she feels “un orphaned" by Son (229); in other words, he “mothers” Jadine. However, this "mothering” takes on a decidedly masculine characteristic; Mori reveals that “although he has released Jadine’s repressed sexuality and assuaged her sense of orphanage, his trip to Eloe paradoxically uncovers his male-oriented perspective” (145). Furthermore, Morrison later reveals that Son is hiding from the law because he had killed his wife by running her over with a car when he discovered her in bed with another man. In the context of this novel this would almost seem an example of hypermasculinity at its very worst, most
frightening manifestation. Although he tells Jadine he didn’t intend to kill his wife, in his
description of the event to Jadine he does not, in fact, seem to regard his behavior as
wrong in and of itself.

There are numerous other examples of Son’s hypermasculinity. He throws his
dirty pajamas on the floor of Jadine’s bathroom. He tells Valerian that plants are just like
women, and to force them to bloom they need to be shaken violently; “you have to jack
them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they’re supposed to” (148). The
narrator describes him as “a man without human rites: unbaptized, uncircumcised, minus
puberty rites or the formal rites of manhood. Unmarried and undivorced. He had
attended no funeral, married in no church, raised no child. Propertyless, homeless, sought
for but not after” (165–66). In other words, Son is portrayed as the stereotypical “lone
wolf,” the man no civilization, no community, no woman can tame. He joins that group
of men known for “their refusal to equate work with life and an inability to stay anywhere
for long” (166).

After Jadine leaves Son, he returns to the island to search for her. When Alma lies
to him and tells him Jadine had left with another man, Son demands that Gideon take him
to Valerian’s. Gideon refuses, saying, “You going to cause mayhem.” We see that Son’s
reaction to being rejected by a woman hasn’t changed much since he killed his wife. He
admits to himself, “It was true. He wanted to find her but he wanted to smash something
too. Smash the man who took the woman he had loved while she slept [as he had
smashed a car into his wife’s lover?], and smash where they had first made love.” Gideon
seems to know Son’s intentions without being told, for he uses Son’s own words in his
refusal: “No. I’m not doing that. Take you to smash up the place?” (301). When Son whines that he doesn’t have a choice, Therese offers to take him.

Son doesn’t know it, but Therese has plans for him. She, too, wants him to abandon Jadine, for she sees in him the next generation of the ghostly, rebellious island men. Instead of taking him to the house, she takes him to the far side of the island, where, she is sure, he will encounter the ghosts and be swayed to remain with Therese and Gideion. When Son asks why she is making the trip so difficult for him, she tells him, “This is the place. Where you can take a choice. Back there you say you don’t. Now you do” (305). She leaves him on the rocks, giving Son the opportunity to take the hero’s journey and return to her world sadder but wiser. “Small boy,” she says to him, “Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties” (305). Therese tells Son to hurry because “the men are waiting for you. . . . You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too. . . . Go there. Choose them” (306).

The novel ends with Son accepting Therese’s challenge in a scene which calls to mind numerous other rebirth scenes. He is soothed by “the nursing sound of the sea” and crawls (like a baby) off the rocks. “Breathing heavily with his mouth open he took a few tentative steps. The pebbles made him stumble and so did the roots of trees. He threw out his hands to guide and steady his going. By and by he walked steadier. . . . Then he ran” (306). In this short scene, Son goes from rebirth, to infant, to adult male, for “the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man” (306). However, in the novel’s close, Morrison undermines Son’s masculinity by linking Son to the feminine realm of nature. The novels ends with the words “lickety-split,” the words
used to describe Brier Rabbit’s narrow escape from the Tar Baby trap, suggesting that Son regains his manhood by rejecting the hegemonic culture which Jadine has come to symbolize. However, as usual, Morrison ends her novel on an ambiguous note. If Son succeeds in making it through the wilds of the island, will he give up his search for Jadine? Or is it possible that the experience will give him a different world view from which to better judge his relationship with her, should he decide to continue to pursue one? The novel suggests that Son does have a nurturing capacity (albeit unrealized) (Erickson 301) whereas Jadine seems to lack it. Once again, Morrison plays with gender, “point[ing] to the complex negotiations of gender and class as well as racial and group identifications in the production of African-American identities” (Bouson 125). *Tar Baby* ends with its female protagonist asserting a more masculine persona and its male protagonist a feminine one. Over and over, Morrison’s novels force readers to abandon dichotomous thinking by redefining the very terms by which cultures are defined: good/bad, black/white, male/female.

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1 Aoi Mori describes Jadine as “merely a black version of the ‘white’ Venus. She does not claim her beauty as an African-American woman but substitutes a copper colored appearance that is acceptable as a modification of Western aesthetics” (38). Mori also argues that Jadine is a living symbol of the “Hottentot Venus,” an early nineteenth-century African woman named Sarah Bartmann who, while alive, was exhibited, scantily clothed, in Paris; this exhibition continued after her death when her sexual organs were removed from her body and displayed. Mori says that Jadine “is unquestionably an objectified modification of Sarah Bartmann” (55).

2 Payant refers to Jadine as “deracinated” (190).

3 Robinson’s “Richard Cory” explores the conflict between appearance and reality and the pressures exerted by a community that desires perfection. Although the poem’s protagonist is wealthy and “admirable schooled in every grace,” making all who know him desirous of emulating him, “Richard Cory, one calm sunner night, / Went home and put a bullet through his brain” (in *Anthology of American Literature*).
4 Collins notes that "Blue-eyed, blond, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with classical African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair" (79).

5 In an interview, Morrison once said of the male tendency to flee: "That has been to me one of the most attractive features about Black male life. I guess I'm not supposed to say that" (qtd. in Erickson 304).
CHAPTER 5

Beloved: Finding “Your Best Thing” by Reconstructing Gender

In Beloved, Morrison reinvents the slave narrative, and in doing so, writes about an institution that was inherently gender-blending. As Angela Davis points out in Women, Race and Class, the practice of slavery generally refused to recognize the strict gender roles which defined the Southern aristocracy; after all, as chattel, slaves were required to labor at whatever task they were given, either in the fields or in the home. Female field workers were expected to do the same work as the males, and there are numerous accounts of the women discussing how well they could, in fact, manage hard labor. The logical consequence of being separated from one’s mother and being forced to work as hard as a man would seem to be, one might logically suspect, a growing masculinization of the female slaves. However, such was not always the case.

Many historians have noted that although the slave women had to do a man’s work, they attempted to hold on to feminine identities defined, in part, by the Cult of Womanhood to which they were exposed by their white mistresses. For example, although they were denied legal marriage, many slave women chose mates and declared themselves married, utilizing ceremonies to celebrate the union (such as “jumping the broom”). When allowed, they tried to fill the role of caregiver to their spouses and children, making every attempt possible to keep the family together. Linda Brent’s grandmother, for example, bought her way out of slavery and was instrumental in helping her granddaughter and grandchildren escape their bondage. Clearly, even though slavery insisted on treating women and men as genderless beasts
of burden, the women often managed to rebel against this definition of themselves.

We see an example of this defiance in Sethe, the female protagonist of *Beloved*.

Sethe has scant memories of her mother, but one of them is of seeing her mother bent over in the field, working indigo. Her memories are so limited, we later discover, because she had little contact with her mother; like the other slave children, she had been put in the care of another slave woman whose task it was to tend to all the other women's children. Sethe's mother was working alongside the men in the field, and Morrison hints that she had taken on the male slave's attribute of defiance. This defiance is manifested in her treatment of her children. First, we learn that Sethe is the only child she kept because her father is black (the others, she "threw away"), and later, we are told Sethe's mother was hung, perhaps as the result of participating in a slave rebellion.

Throughout her life, Sethe tries to balance two seemingly antagonistic needs—her desire to mimic the hegemonic culture's definition of the perfect wife and mother and her equally urgent desire to reject that same dominant white culture when it would deny her basic personhood.

Sethe is sold to the Garners and taken to Sweet Home at age thirteen. Although Paul D remembers that she was already "iron-eyed" at that point, Sethe's placement as house slave in a relatively safe environment spares her from further hardening. She attempts to be a traditionally feminine self. At Sweet Home, she is given the illusion that she has some control over her life, an illusion which she embellishes with several strategies. For example, she puts flowers in Mrs. Garner's kitchen to enable her to consider it her own, not her owners'; only then was she "able
to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did” (22). When she realizes she is expected to pick one of the male slaves as a mate, she takes one full year before choosing Halle, and once she makes her decision, she asks Mrs. Garner to allow them to officially marry. When Mrs. Garner seems amused by the idea, Sethe realizes that she will have to create whatever ceremony she will have, so she stitches together a “bedding dress” for the consummation of their relationship.

However, what most clearly defines Sethe’s femininity is her determination to properly and fully mother her children. She tells Paul D how she carefully placed her baby in a basket in the shade, how she tied a rope around Buglar’s ankle to keep him out of harm’s way while they smoked pork. She admits the job was difficult, especially because Halle was often absent with her debt work and she had no female role models to teach her. Sethe acknowledges that at times she needs the help of others. When Howard’s hand is injured, she describes how Sixo arrived and splinted it; Sethe appreciates his help, noting, “See, I never would have thought of that. Never” (161). However, Sethe claims full responsibility for getting her children out of slavery, bragging to Paul D,

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that. I had help, of course, lots of that, but still it was me doing it; me saying, Go on, and Now. Me having to look out. Me using my own head. But it was more than that. It
was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good.

Good and right. I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could go between. I was *that* wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. (162)

It is important to note that although she speaks with what one might argue is masculine pride at her ability to protect her family, even as she does so, her achievement is edged with feelings of guilt; she felt "selfish" for taking on this masculine responsibility so well and constantly refers back to the love she felt for her children, undermining her skill at getting her children out of slavery and focusing instead on the mother/child bond.

The most obvious early symbol of Sethe’s femininity—metaphorical and literal—is her obsession with providing milk for her babies. Sethe insists that she was the only one who could properly care for her baby: “Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn’t know it. . . . Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me” (16). Clearly, Sethe’s determination to be the only one to breast feed her baby is her way of defying a system that separated children from mothers, sending them off to be nursed instead by a “mammy” so the mothers could return to their labors. Sethe and Sethe’s milk supply become one, for she instructs the women hiding her baby to give it a “sugar titty,” allowing the baby to remember how to suckle so that upon Sethe’s return, “the milk would be there and I would be there with it” (16). Later in the novel, the image of the fiercely nursing mother is repeated in the
horrific shed scene, when Sethe nurses Denver while the blood of her recently-slaughtered sister flows down Sethe’s breasts and mixes with the milk.

Sethe’s milk is symbolic of her need to mother her children, a need which was denied to her mother but one which she refuses to have denied her. This is why she is so adamant to have Paul D understand the significance of her having her milk “taken” by schoolteacher’s pupils. Paul D, however, is uncomfortable with what he calls Sethe’s “too thick” love, and he pointedly misses her point when she tells him about the shaming event. Nevertheless, Sethe persists in trying to make him comprehend what was most important to her. Paul D asks,

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you were pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (17)

Although Paul D tries to focus on the moral/ethical issues of just how great of an outrage that particular act was, Sethe is consumed with the symbolic implications of the boys’ action. Certainly, an experienced nursing mother knows that nobody can “take” her milk; the more that is used, the more the body produces, so the only way to stop the milk supply is to prevent it from being expressed. Therefore, Sethe’s concern is really that the boys made a mockery of her vision of herself as a fully human mother. She will allow no trespass on her vision of herself as her children’s mother, which is something Paul D finds out quickly.

When Paul D begins the process of settling down with Sethe, they quickly discover one area of contention: her mothering. After Denver rejects Paul D with
rudeness, he asks Sethe if Denver is merely reflecting feelings Sethe has: “Then she’s of one mind and you another? If you can call whatever’s in her head a mind, that is” (44). Sethe reacts swiftly to his insult: “Excuse me, but I can’t hear a word against her. I’ll chastise her. You leave her alone” (45). Paul D is shocked by Sethe’s attitude.

Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (45).

Paul D knows that if Sethe insists on having such a fierce love, she will have little energy left over for herself and for him. He urges her to shift her point of view and Denver’s: “I’m not asking you to choose. Nobody would. I thought—well, I thought you could—there was some space left over for me. . . . Tell her it’s not about choosing somebody over her—it’s making space for somebody along with her” (45). Next, Paul D tries to assert his rights as the new man-of-the-house, telling Sethe, “There’s no way I’m going to hurt her or not take care of what she need if I can, but I can’t be told to keep my mouth shut if she’s acting ugly. You want me here, don’t put no gag on me” (45). Sethe’s reaction to that declaration is to pull back from Paul D and suggest they leave things as they are. However, Paul D is unwilling to live in such a ill-defined relationship. He wants Sethe to be able to devote her emotional energy to herself, not to constantly give and give to the one remaining child. Although he’s only
been with Sethe a short time, he already perceives the extent of her damaged psyche and intuits that she needs time and help in recovering the broken fragments of her life. Only when she has healed herself, he knows, can she enter into an equal and fully satisfying relationship with others:

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. Make sure you get back out. I’m not saying this because I need a place to stay. That’s the last thing I need. I told you, I’m a walking man. . . . But when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn’t the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life, girl. A life” (46).

Although Sethe agrees to give their life together a chance, her all-encompassing mother love continues to be a major bone of contention between them. The tension increases when Beloved joins the family and Paul D feels that he is being pushed even further away from Sethe’s attention.

Many critics have written on mothering in Morrison’s novels,¹ but the ability to mother is only one aspect of feminine behavior. In “The Politics of Gender in Toni Morrison’s Beloved: If ‘a man ain’t nothing but a man,’ Then What is a Woman?” Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu argues that Sethe takes on a masculine identity. As proof, Beaulieu refers to Baby Sugg’s injunction that Sethe abandon her aggressive stance when trying to deal with her numerous problems: “Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of them down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don’t study war no more.” Beaulieu argues that Sugg is commenting on Sethe’s
masculine trait of fighting (69). However, since Baby is quoting verbatim a popular church hymn, I don’t think she is indicating that these words themselves apply specifically to Sethe, but to all the wronged people in the world; the song’s message is simply that it is every Christian’s duty to let God attend to vengeance. Beaulieu’s own words actually undermine her argument, for she notes that “Sethe has acquired an arsenal of defenses against the past” (69 emphasis added). She later argues that “for most of the eighteen years she conducts active warfare, a decidedly male activity, against the past and its occurrences,” (69), but is this really true? Sethe’s “warfare” has consisted primarily of avoiding her memories, and it would be difficult to classify avoidance as “masculine.” In addition, the narrator tells us that “every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost” (58). Clearly, Sethe’s “weapons” are not effective if she is still able to feel instant pain. Furthermore, Denver has noted that whenever she brings up the past to Sethe, “Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries” (58), which does not suggest a tough, masculine, warlike approach to her problems. Beaulieu also points to what she describes as Sethe’s “militant” protection of her children, but in fact, even in nature, females of many species are known to be willing to fight to the death for their offspring. Even the murder of her daughter—an action that can easily be viewed as an aggressive, warlike behavior—is not viewed as such by Sethe herself. She sees it as defensive: “I stopped him. . . . I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164).

In fact, Sethe consistently sees herself as feminine; that is why she insisted on the bedding dress—to better play the role of bride—and that is why, when Paul D first
reappears, she undermines her ability to hold her household together without the benefit of a man:

“No man? You here by yourself?”

“Me and Denver,” she said.

“That all right by you?”

“That’s all right by me.”

She saw his skepticism and went on. “I cook at a restaurant in town. And I sew a little on the sly.” (10)

Even though she protests she is “all right” with living without a man, she attempts to draw Paul D’s attention to her coping skills—cooking and sewing—which are clearly markers of the feminine.

Her relationship with Paul D most clearly suggests her desire to fulfill the feminine. Critics have noted that many slave women wanted to mimic the patriarchal, Cult-of- Motherhood lifestyle. Even Frederick Douglass, an ardent supporter of equal rights for women, urged Black women to manage their households and take responsibility for rearing the children (Yee 41). Historians tell us that after the Civil War was over, many of the sharecroppers’ wives refused to work the field, opting instead to stay at home, cooking and caring for the children, even though their labor was desperately needed. Although Sethe continues to work her job (there is no indication that Paul D has any plans to ask her to stop, except, perhaps, in his request that she get pregnant), she quickly begins to envision herself as Paul’s wife and life partner: “she wanted Paul D. No matter what he told and knew, she wanted him in her life. . . . The weight and angle of him; the true-to-life hair on him; arched back,
educated hands. His waiting eyes and awful human power. The mind of him that knew her own. Her story was bearable because it was his as well” (99). She is excited at the prospect of “launch[ing] her newer, stronger life with a tender man” (99). That she sees her new life as being “stronger” with the help of Paul D suggests she has been feeling vulnerable, a stereotypically feminine trait. In order to celebrate this newly-discovered desire in herself, Sethe rushes to cook a fine meal as an “offering” to the relationship (100), and cooking as a way to show love is traditionally associated with the feminine.

Her feminine need to sacrifice all to her children reaches its zenith when Sethe finally understands that Beloved is the reincarnation of her dead baby. She allows herself to be totally consumed by Beloved’s demands, even to the point of starving herself while Beloved grows bigger and bigger. She is willing to give up Paul D to be with her two daughters and believes wholeheartedly that “the best thing she was, was her children” (251). All the masculine tasks Sethe has had to handle were not assumed by choice. She had to take on a man’s job to protect her children: “She might have to work the slaughterhouse yard, but not her daughter” (251).

In this novel, Sethe does at times blend the gender lines, although she seems anxious to return to stereotypical “feminine” behavior when she is given the opportunity. However, we do find two characters who consistently call into question gendered roles, Paul D and Baby Suggs.

It is easy to overlook the importance of the character Baby Suggs in the novel simply because, in the present time of the novel, she is already deceased. We learn about her only through the words of other characters. However, Baby Suggs plays an
important role in the novel because it is through her that Morrison delivers yet again a theme close to her heart—the need to reinvent a Black culture, one which is not based on the White hegemonic model. In order to bring about a new culture, all the roles in the culture must be called into question. In “Black Women and the Church,” Jacquelyn Grant describes how black women have been described as the “backbone” of the church which is, she says, a code term for the reality of their position: “women are in the background and should be kept there” (141). Grant relates the rejection Black women experienced in the early 19th century when they attempted to go beyond support and become active members of their churches, even preachers. She quotes the response of one of the faithful, Mrs. Jarena Lee, when she was first refused entry into the pulpit: “As unseemly as it may appear nowadays for a woman to preach, it should be remembered that nothing is impossible with God” (142). The key word to note here is “unseemly”; we can easily read behind it to discover her meaning—“unwomanly,” “unfeminine.” Grant argues that because black women are the most oppressed in society, they share a closer affinity with Christ, who himself was oppressed. Only when the church allows black women to preach, she contends, will it be able to offer an “authentic theology of liberation”; “it is only when Black women and men share jointly the leadership in theology and in the church and community that the Black nation will become strong and liberated” (149). Morrison herself has preached that only when Black people separate themselves from the model of the hegemonic culture will they ever be free, and one way to separate from that culture is to challenge its basic assumptions. Therefore, when she creates Baby Suggs, Morrison
gives us a womanly hero who takes on the "unseemly" role of preacher to bring the Word to her people.

The significance of Baby Sugg’s preaching cannot be underestimated as the key to her character. In *Sisters of the Spirit*, William L. Andrews introduces "spiritual autobiographies" in which three African-American women (born in the 1700’s) describe their struggle to become recognized leaders of their denominations, a struggle Andrews sees as a "bold form of self-authorization" (1). After their conversions, these women sought to move on to a higher level in their relationship with God, that of sanctification, "or a ‘new birth,’ free from the power of sin by virtue of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The fully sanctified Christian achieves spiritual perfection . . . [called] ‘holiness,’ evidenced by inward and outward righteousness" (Andrews 15).

Baby Suggs’ aphorism “a man ain’t nothing but a man” gives us some insight into her mindset. Her parallel response, “but a son? Well, now, that’s somebody” is not the one which might spring to the readers’ mind. Instead, we find ourselves asking, “if a man ain’t nothing but a man, what is a woman?” Baby’s life story gives us some idea. We learn that Baby had eight children by six father, and their births taught her an important lesson: “what she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23). She lost all her children but Halle, and when Sethe returns alone, she realizes she has lost him, too. She is haunted by the knowledge that she has forgotten almost everything about her precious babies except the little details, like Ardella’s love for the burned bottom of bread. We know little else about her early slave life except that she was forced to reproduce and she somehow hurt her hip in
Carolina (there is the suggestion that it may have occurred when her owner knocked her down), an injury which permanently crippled her. Bought at a discount price by Garner, she is brought to Sweet Home, which becomes to her a sort of haven. In spite of this, however, Baby still feels a sadness which “was at her center, the desolated center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like” (140).

When Halle manages to buy Baby’s freedom, he helps to put the map in her hands, a map she didn’t even know she was missing. As Garner takes her into freedom, she feels a strange emotion coming over her:

Something’s the matter. What’s the matter? What’s the matter? she asked herself. She didn’t know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, “These hands belong to me. These my hands.” Now she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing? She felt like a fool and began to laugh out loud” (141).

Baby Suggs is experiencing a rebirth, a rebirth into freedom and the chance to leave behind all the white society has forced her to do and believe. Her new life is celebrated with a reclaiming of her name. She asks Garner why he always called her “Jenny,” and when he tells her that’s what was written on her sales ticket, she at first tells him she has no name. Then she says that although she’ll answer to anything, her
husband’s name was Suggs. Of course, Garner cannot allow this inaccuracy to go unnoted. He says, “You got married, Jenny? I didn’t know it.” She responds, “Manner of speaking” (142). Perhaps emboldened by her newly found freedom, she insists, “Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband,” and when Garner asks what her husband had called her, he laughs when she responds “Baby” (142). Nevertheless, Baby ignores Garner’s mocking tone and his warning that “Mrs. Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro” (142). As soon as she is left with another black woman, she introduces herself as Mrs. Baby Suggs.

When she joins into the community of free black people, she continues to create a new identity for herself. She moves into a house that previously was occupied by a preacher and begins to fill her community’s recent need for a religious leader by letting herself heed the Call. Abandoning the patriarchal-inspired architecture of the formal church and its pulpit², Baby Suggs instead seeks the feminine world of nature to bring the Word to her people. Here, in the Clearing, she takes on the “manly” task of preaching, but she mixes it with a decidedly feminine delivery. Her sermon is filled with references to the physical, natural world, the here-and-now, and the need to worship the bodily temple of God’s creation. Gone are the references to hellfire and damnation if the Father’s words are not heeded, the injunctions to submit to the will of the Heavenly Father or face everlasting pain. Baby’s sermons are love centered, and her words in the clearing are perhaps the most moving of all of Morrison’s:

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as
soon pick ‘em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they
flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use,
tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them
up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on
your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!” (88).

Unlike her male predecessors, Baby Suggs “did not tell them to clean up
their lives or to go and sin no more. . . . She told them that the only grace they could
have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not
have it” (88). So Baby’s appeal is not to the will, but to the imagination, the creative
(feminine?) power within each person, the power she never realized she had until she
was freed. Because she had not been able to imagine what being free would feel like,
Baby had undervalued it, thought that Halle had wasted his time and life on buying her
freedom, freedom for “a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged
dog.” When she is free, however, she “could not believe that Halle knew what she
didn’t’ that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing
like it in this world” (141). So instead of intoning the rules, regulations, and threats of
the Father, Baby Suggs tells her people to imagine their possibilities so they can make
them real. Amazingly, her message is heard and respected. The townspeople refer to
her as Baby Suggs, Holy; to her neighbors, she is “a mountain” (180). Unfortunately,
as Andrews points out, the perfection that results from achieving “holiness” “does not
prevent the sanctified Christian from making mistakes” (15). Baby Suggs is perhaps a
little too good of a woman; her neighbors finally resist her call when she throws the
party to celebrate Sethe and Denver’s arrival. On that day, Baby could “sniff the
disapproval” of her neighbors and understand the cause: “her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (138). Would the townspeople have felt the same had a male done the same? At any rate, this compassionate woman who “had no back door” (184) accidentally violated her community’s rules and, therefore, had to be punished with indifference the day the slavecatchers appeared in the town. After her family’s tragedy, she stops preaching, but even then, Stamp Paid implores her to return to her pulpit in the clearing. His plea falls on deaf ears though, for “Baby Suggs’ heart [had] collapsed” (183), and she spends the rest of her life in bed in the haunted house, “pondering color.” Possibly because her neighbors are so horrified by Sethe’s actions, nobody comes to visit Baby during her long, slow death, neglecting the woman who had done so much for them. Interestingly, they speak highly of her after her death, and it is partly their fondness for her that gives them the determination to intercede when Denver finally comes to them for help. Through Baby Suggs, Morrison once again shows us what can happen when someone dares to violate the rules of the community, even when one does so to benefit the community. Baby Suggs is punished because she tries to do more than any woman (or man?) should do, and kindness—just like cruelty—can wreck havoc on a community.

It is difficult to read Morrison’s fictional slave narrative without thinking of its famous predecessor, Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The irony of the world’s most famous slave narrative being written by a white woman has not gone unnoted, especially when, despite her good intentions, some of Stowe’s racial prejudice manages to creep into her novel. Some critics have portrayed Stowe’s protagonist,
Uncle Tom, as a weak, feminine man, so passive and anxious to please as to be worthy only of scorn. Others argue that because Stowe fashioned him as a Christ figure, his nonviolent ways tended to feminize him. With Paul D, Morrison offers us a slave narrative with a male protagonist who is neither hypermasculine (as are some of the men in nonfictional accounts who dwell extensively on how they had to “whip” their masters to prove their manhood) nor hypomasculine. Once again, Morrison gives us a character who does not fit neatly into any one gender category, a character who blurs the lines between male and female.

Sethe reacts to Paul D’s sudden and unexpected visit as many women react to men they find attractive, becoming girlish and flirtatious: “when she laughed it came out loose and young” (6). She is anxious to wait on him, offering to tend to his feet, asking him to stay for a visit, and telling him he looks good. Our narrator tells us that “all of the Sweet Home men, before and after Halle, treated her to a mild brotherly flirtation, so subtle you had to scratch for it” (7), but clearly, this flirtation is a little more than brotherly/sisterly.

Our narrator tells us more about Paul D, and the description announces the gender-blurring Morrison utilizes in her depiction of this character. Paul D is described as sympathetic and compassionate, traits normally associated with the feminine: “For a man with an immobile face it was amazing how ready it was to smile, or blaze or be sorry with you. As though all you had to do was get his attention and right away he produced the feeling you were feeling” (7-8). However, shortly after this passage, we learn that, in a traditionally masculine way, Paul D was both proud and annoyed with Sethe’s ability to flee slavery with her children; he was “proud she
had done it; annoyed that she had not needed Halle or him in the doing" (8). We learn that Paul D is possessed of what is termed "feminine intuition," for as he walks into Sethe's house for the first time and finds himself in "a pool of red and undulating light that locked him where he stood" (8), he immediately understands that the supernatural lives in this house and is so affected by feeling the presence that "a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (9). Our narrator informs us that Paul D has a special kinship with women:

    Not even trying, he had become the kind of man who could walk into a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could. There was something blessed in his manner. . . . Therefore, although he did not understand why this was so, he was not surprised when Denver dripped tears into the stovefire. Nor, fifteen minutes later, after telling him about her stolen milk, her mother wept as well" (17).

By describing Paul D as "blessed," the man who listens to the females' confessions, Morrison is figuring Paul D as Christ-like. Although Beaulieu describes Paul D's actions against the ghost in Sethe's house as "typically male" because "he confronts, and when he is not satisfied, he resorts to violent action" (62), this is not the only way to judge the scene in which Paul D first becomes acquainted with the spiteful ghost. Just as Christ threw over the tables set out by the moneylenders, Paul D attacks the ghost haunting Sethe's house with a table: "holding the table by two legs, be bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. 'You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!'" (18). If we view Paul D as a Christ figure, the phrase "God damn it" is not
merely a curse here; it is an injunction made by one who has the authority to demand it. "With a table and a loud male voice he had rid 124 of its claim to local fame" (37), successfully banishing the invisible spirit from Sethe’s home, at least for awhile. Although some might wish to argue it took a strong male voice to rid the house of the ghost, Morrison makes it clear throughout the novel that in some ways, the ghost was a welcome presence to Sethe, and she had long ago decided to accommodate rather than confront it.

Morrison continues to play up Paul D’s feminine side. We learn that he is closely aligned with nature, and sharing a kinship with “mother nature” is stereotypically a feminine trait; in fact, he even talks with trees, naming his favorite “Brother” (21). However, Morrison departs from Stowe’s model in a significant way; this Christ is not asexual and passive. Paul D is passionately sexualized, eager to make love to the woman who had made all the men of Sweet Home crave the relationship that her husband Halle had enjoyed. And although their first hurried lovemaking is disappointing to both of them, the next morning, Paul D behaves like a man in charge, singing and asking Sethe where he can look for work. In fact, Paul D is quick to take on the role of Sethe’s lover, becoming jealous when he thinks Denver is suggesting that he is only one in a long line of men in Sethe’s house when she asks him “how long he was going to hang around” (43).

His masculine side is made evident in his desire to control his emotions: “the best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one” (45). He tries to keep his emotions “in that tobacco tin
buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him" (72-73). Nevertheless, in spite of his efforts not to feel emotions, he clearly does. Denver’s rude question “hurt him so much he missed the table [with his coffee cup]” (43). He tries to cover up his vulnerability by utilizing a mix of stereotypical masculine posturing and genuine emotion, telling Sethe both that he must be allowed authority over Denver if he is to stay and offering to “catch” Sethe when she needs him.

Paul D’s intuition is manifested again upon the arrival of Beloved. From the moment he meets her, Paul D is suspicious of her. As he watches in amazement as Beloved gulps down cup after cup of water, he comments, “She said she was thirsty . . . mighty thirsty look like” (51), his words suggesting distrust. Although Sethe and Denver welcome this stranger into their home without hesitation, Paul D is not happy with the new arrival coming so quickly at the heels of his recent victory of taking Sethe and Denver to the local fair. Five weeks after her arrival, Paul D notes Beloved is “shining” and also notices that Sethe and Denver seem oblivious to her sexual awakening. Beloved’s “petlike adoration that took hold of her as she looked at Sethe” annoys Paul D further, and he begins to act in a masculine way, with an attack upon the woman whom he perceives as a threat to his own position in the house. Paul D begins to riddle Beloved with questions about her past. His attack is severe enough to warrant a rebuke from Sethe: “Paul D, stop picking on her” (65). He ignores Sethe’s plea and reasserts his masculine stance, picking up a (phallic?) knife, “holding the knife handle in his fist like a [phallic?] pole” (65). He uses his pole to try to
“catch” Beloved in a lie, but his plan backfires when the women leap to her defense and “Paul D had the feeling a large, silver fish [feminine?] had slipped from his hands the minute he grabbed hold of its tail” (65). In spite of this masculine imagery, he once again return to feminine intuition when Sethe pointedly asks him why Beloved so upsets him: “I can’t place it. It’s a feeling in me” (67).

Life as a prisoner also feminizes Paul D. As Moglen points out, when Paul D and his fellow prisoners are forced to perform oral sex with the guards, they are trapped in a “ritual of white male bonding intended to humiliate its victims by feminizing them, parodying while rehearsing the primal act of nurturence” (208). Paul D’s experience is an inversion of Sethe’s; whereas Sethe had to endure having her milk taken away from her, Paul D is forced to “take” the “milk” (semen) of the white guards. Their reactions to the rapes are similar. Sethe remembers being overcome with revulsion at the thought of the young boy’s “mossy teeth,“ and Paul D, “convinced he was next, . . . retched” and still can remember “smelling the guard, listening to his soft grunts” (108).

Morrison paints a portrait of Paul D in contrasting masculine/feminine characteristics. When Sethe disparages Halle, Paul D leaps to his fellow man’s defense, telling her “Halle stood by you. He never left you” (68) even though he knows he will have to follow up this assertion by telling Sethe a horrible fact she was not yet privy to—her husband was trapped in the loft while she was attacked by the boys who took her milk and could do nothing but watch helplessly. This event led to Halle’s mental breakdown, which Paul D must now admit to Sethe. Paul D fiercely defends men and manhood to Sethe, accusing her of having unrealistic expectations,
and most importantly, telling her that her expectations of “manly men” are unfair and sexist: “Hey! Hey! Listen up. Let me tell you something. A man ain’t a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can’t chop down because they’re inside” (69).

He fears that Sethe is calling his and Halle’s manhood into question, hitting upon an issue that has preoccupied his mind for years. Because he was a slave, Paul D had had himself defined by other people. Even though Garner had good intentions in giving the Sweet Home males the right to call themselves “men,” Paul D understands that this is nothing more than a privilege granted to them by their owner: “Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? . . . They were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race. Watchdogs without teeth; steer bulls without horns; gelded workhorses” (125). This liminal status is made incarnate in Paul D’s encounter with Mister, the rooster. Paul D recounts to Sethe the shame he felt being led back to Sweet Home in chains, with a bit in his mouth. He noticed the rooster sitting on a tub, and he felt the rooster was watching him with smug satisfaction:

“I swear he smiled. . . . Mister, he looked so . . . free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher. . . . Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72).
Paul D absorbs all the focus of the dehumanizing process of slavery. He recognizes himself only as a "something else." Perhaps it is this splintering of his self that empowers Paul D to try to forge a new self, a different "something else," a mixture of the masculine and the feminine. This event is what causes the tension that constantly pulls Paul D between the two gender roles, for it allows him to see that such roles are only definitions, and, he has learned, definitions are easily changed. However, it is understandably difficult for Paul D to let go of his view of himself as primarily a man, to release years of training in the masculine role. Even though his life experiences have taught him that he can in fact define himself, he, like many other of Morrison’s characters, is constantly pulled between the image others foist upon him and that he would make for himself. This is why "it troubled him that, concerning his own manhood, he could not satisfy himself on that point" (220).

Like many of Morrison’s male characters, Paul D flees when he feels threatened by a woman. After Stamp Paid shows him the newspaper clipping concerning Sethe’s murder of her child, Paul D confronts and verbally attacks her. Her pride in taking such a strong, decisive action literally unmans Paul D; her action "scared him" (164). His response is to project upon her his own feelings of inadequacy; as soon as he tells her, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," he realizes "how fast he had moved from his shame to hers" (165). Paul D judges Sethe, but he cannot handle having her judge him. He leaves her, but clearly, he is not ready to give up on their relationship, for he doesn’t go far away, choosing to live in the basement of the community church. There, he wallows in self-pity, drinking and refusing offers of help, even when Stamp Paid begs his forgiveness.
Paul D calls his own actions into question. He is still struggling with defining himself and letting go of other people’s definition of himself: “When he looks at himself through Garner’s eyes, he sees one thing. Through Sixo’s, another. One makes him feel righteous. One makes him feel ashamed” (267). Paul D recalls all the horrific moments of his life and finally decides that what he and Sethe had started is too precious to lose, so he returns to her home. He is shocked to find her bedridden and mentally unstable. At first, he takes an aggressive, masculine stance but immediately calls himself into check and mixes his words with feminine compassion: “Don’t you die on me! This is Baby Suggs’ bed! Is that what you planning?” He is so angry he could kill her. He checks himself, remembering Denver’s warning, and whispers, “What you planning, Sethe?” (272). He offers to devote himself to her care, telling her, “I’m a take care of you, you hear? Starting now” (272). Then, in a gesture reminiscent of Milkman’s rebirth in Song of Solomon, Paul D offers to submit himself entirely to Sethe, to bathe her and rub her feet. This allows Sethe to see once again the “blessedness” in him, the thing “that has made him the kind of man who can walk in a house and make the women cry” (272). Although Paul D makes it clear that he still does not agree with Sethe’s actions years ago, he also lets her know he is not judging her. When Sethe moans the loss of Beloved, calling her her “best thing,” Paul D remembers what Sixo had said of the woman he loved: “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind” (272-73).
This image of a melding of the masculine and feminine makes Paul D realize that Sethe has helped him see himself as a whole person. She had made him so comfortable in his personhood that “he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers” (273). Responding to her pain, Paul D lovingly offers her a non-judgmental, alternative view: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (273). In Paul D, Morrison accurately depicts one of the coping skills open to the newly-freed men of slavery, for as Franklin points out, after slavery, “when many Black males were blocked in their efforts to assume aspects of the male role, they constructed and developed alternative definitions of the male role. . . . Since the provider-protector role could not be assumed, many Black males developed a nurturing role with wives and children similar to the role reserved for white females” (6).

Sethe and Paul D are perhaps the only couple in Morrison’s novels who seem to have a chance for a good future with one another. As Beaulieu suggests, “Once Paul D has accepted his condition of fragmentation, a logical consequence of a life of enslavement . . . he can free Sethe from her own enslavement, promising her a future” (78). Paul D acknowledges that he cannot bully or force Sethe to act as he would wish, but he can offer her love and encouragement. Although the novel ends with an outwardly hegemonic heterosexual coupling, Morrison’s gender-blurring in Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D points to other ways of viewing and therefore defining oneself instead of accepting those definitions foisted by the dominant culture.

2 Grant describes an incident in 1971 in which she was not allowed to enter the pulpit to place a tape recorder there; she was told women were not allowed there, and later during the convention, she was shocked when a female Presbyterian Church executive was "refused the right to speak from the pulpit" (144).
CHAPTER 6

Not Quite a Paradise: The Price of Resistance

Nowhere are the genders more sharply divided than in Morrison’s Paradise. Here the readers are introduced to an all-Black town named Ruby, the reincarnation of another all-Black town, Haven, formed in 1890 after emancipation. After World War II, the citizens of Haven decided to relocate deeper into the prairie after their men were allowed to fight a war for their country but were not respected or honored for their service. The title Paradise suggests this new all-Black town might be a paradise on earth. Ruby, however, becomes a paradise only for the men. The women here do not fare as well, as Morrison intimates in her jarring opening line: “they shoot the white girl first” (3). In interviews concerning the release of Paradise, Morrison admits deliberately concealing the race of her characters. I suggest she does this for a specific reason; although race is an issue in this novel, as in all of Morrison’s novels, the real issue with which she grapples in Paradise is male/female relationships. The men and women of Ruby are profoundly polarized, and perhaps this complete gender differentiation in this novel explains the lack of a strongly bigendered character. There is only one possible candidate who comes close to being bigendered, Patricia. However, in the character Consolata, Morrison offers yet another way of looking at gender roles. Consolata exemplifies a non-conforming “pagan” gender, not simply “bi” but something perhaps beyond an easily “numbered” gender, something unspeakable and therefore threatening to the community of men controlling Ruby.

The novel’s opening line demonstrates the polarity of the men and women. The “they” of “they shoot the white girl first” is quickly determined by the reader to be a
masculine "they." Two of "them" wear ties, and readers are told that "armed men search rooms" (3-4). The men's attitude toward the women is immediately evident in the violence of the verb—"shoot"—and emphasized by their use of the word "girl" to describe a person whom the readers later discover to be an adult woman. Morrison tells us there are nine men, "over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill" (3). Readers cannot help but wonder why or for whom these men feel "obliged" to kill the unarmed women and note the irony in hyper-masculine, gun-toting men priding themselves on mowing down the "panicked does leaping" to escape their gunshots (18). The narrator notes that the men are "alert to the female malice that hides here," symbolized by the "yeast-and-butter smell of rising dough," an odor that typically would conjure positive connotations of a woman at the hearth, baking for her family. Perhaps for these men, the smell reminds them of the yeasty odor of an infected vagina, symbolic of womanhood gone amuck. The odor is quickly replaced with an image of one of their victims, blood-smeared, symbolic perhaps of the world of menses or childbirth, a sight which is translated in a characteristically misogynous manner by one of the men as being reminiscent of "the clothes of an easily-had woman" (4). This image of the recently-slain woman is juxtaposed with the sight of an "old hen, her puffed and bloody hind parts cherished . . . for delivering freaks" (5). By overlaying these two images, Morrison effectively relays the males' unbridled hatred and disgust of all things feminine.

With a phallic gun in one hand and a feminine glass of milk in the other, one of Ruby's protectors sees no incongruity in protecting the women of his community by annihilating the women of another. Perhaps this is because in spite of their protestations, the men are actually not defending their women for the sake of the women; they are killing
in self-interest, to keep alive the legacy of an all-black community controlled solely by men. Although we are told that with “God on their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (18), the ambiguity of this sentence is manifest. They are not taking aim “for [the defense of] Ruby”; rather they are aiming at Ruby, the female/s who refuse to live up to the Biblical scripture: “Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above Rubies” (Proverbs 31). Because the women of the convent, the “bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” refuse to submit to masculine authority and play out their God-given roles as good, obedient wives, “they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman” (8) and must, therefore, be killed.

The patriarchal point-of-view is further illumined by the men’s memories of their battle days in the war and of how the “Old Fathers” and “new fathers” had attempted to stake their claim in the territory that was later to become Ruby by moving the oven from their old community, Haven. The men view themselves as protectors of the oven, ironically a symbol of the feminine vagina, “round as a head, deep as desire,” which had “nourished them and monumentalized what they had done” (7). The men decide to dismantle the oven their forefathers had forged and take it with them on their long journey in search of a new home. The oven becomes a central figure in the novel, representing what the men have done to the women of the community. By idealizing womanhood and—literally and figuratively—putting it on a pedestal and then pledging masculine protection, the men of Ruby have severely limited and controlled the lives of the women there.

The men, of course, pride themselves on making Ruby a safe haven for their women, but they clearly do so to protect their own interests in these women:
A sleep-less woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. . . . Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll as she liked, think of . . . war, of family things, or lift her eyes to the stars and think of nothing at all. And if a light shone from a house up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. . . . When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else. (8-9)

In other words, as long as the women of the town adhere to the men’s idealized definitions of what good mothers and daughters should be, chaste, nurturing and obedient, they were “protected,” “free” to attend to domestic concerns, and hopefully, they would be considerate enough to make sure that their domestic responsibilities—their crying babies, for example—did not impinge on the sleep and lives of their men.

The offer of masculine protection for Ruby’s female population is merely a cover for their deep-seated disgust and distrust of the feminine. This “free and protected” passage is followed, in the next paragraph, by a description of a bathroom in the convent. The invading men, searching for women to murder, note the bathtub, which “rests on the backs of four mermaids—their tails split wide for the tub’s security their breasts arched for security” (9). Here is a literal symbol of the sexualized role of women, a role which demands they make themselves physically available to serve the men, with “tails split wide open” and “breasts arched.” The “protected” woman is juxtaposed with the mermaids,
setting up the Madonna/whore dichotomy which is further emphasized with the man’s observation of “a Modess box . . . on the toilet tank and a bucket of soiled things. . . . [disgusted, he backs out, for] he does not want to see himself stalking females or their liquid” (9).

Although the men of Ruby disapprove of physically abusing their own women, their treatment of their wives, daughters, and sisters is contemptuous. We get a glimpse into the husband/wife dynamic via Soane and Deacon’s marriage. In one pre-dawn scene, Soane is looking out her kitchen window and utters a playful warning to her husband’s prey: “Look out, quail. Deacon’s gunning for you” (100). Once again, Morrison evokes the image of the male in his stereotypical hyper-masculine element, toting a gun and slaughtering defenseless creatures. Soane correctly predicts her husband will return home with a sack of dead quail and “say something like ‘This ought to take care of supper.’ Proud. Like he’s giving me a present. Like you [the quail] was already plucked, cleaned, and cooked” (100). With this one comment, Morrison makes an important observation on the lives of the women of Ruby: no matter how hard they work—often along side their men—they still are expected to do more. Regardless of how much barbed wire they’ve strung that day, how many clothes they’ve washed by hand and hung to dry and ironed, how late they stayed up with colicky babies, they are still expected to prepare the meals, serve them, and then clean up while their husbands recover from their labors. This scene also brings to mind the stereotypical image of the primitive hunter/provider role of the man, and the woman’s role of nurturer through service. Morrison’s version, however, refuses to maintain this seemingly idyllic image. Instead, Soane’s words to the quail suggest that there is no mutual understanding between herself and her husband; by
symbolically siding with the quail with her warning and noting that her husband's view of his "gift" radically differs from her own, Soane calls attention to the two separate spheres in which the men and women of Ruby live. Soane obviously aligns herself with the quail—a harmless creature, destined to be the commodity by which Deacon asserts his manhood.

So, too, do the women of Ruby become their husband's commodities, and as such, they are valuable only as they reflect glory upon the men. Their own needs and desires must become subordinated to the men's and have no value without male approval; this explains the men's reluctance to heed the women's opinions, even on matters that directly and deeply affect the women's lives. For example, in the early-morning quiet, when Soane's mind continues to fly back and forth over the events of her life, she remembers when Haven's residents decided to relocate and the men's insistence on bringing the oven with them. Even though the townswomen "nodded" at the idea, "privately they resented the truck space given over to it—rather than a few more sacks of seed . . . or even a child's crib. Resented the hours spent putting it back together—hours that could have been spent getting the privy door on sooner" (103). Once again, Morrison makes clear that the men of Ruby are more interested in their own ideas and needs, ignoring their wives' wishes when they threaten to conflict with the men's. Soane notes ironically that the oven no longer serves as the communal gathering place after "beautiful baptisms" (103), but has become instead a hangout for beer drinking and sexual encounters, an oven "where the warming flesh was human" (104). Clearly making a parallel between the oven and the women of Ruby, Morrison has Soane remark that the men have enshrined the oven, just as they enshrine their women, a process that has resulted in the degradation of
both. Soane notes that this tendency had gone “too far. A utility became a shrine . . . and, like anything that offended Him, destroyed its own self” (103-04).

By fostering the notion of feminine vulnerability in their girls and convincing them they are frail, weak creatures in desperate need of male protection, the parents of Ruby simultaneously elevate and restrict their daughters’ potential. The females, like the oven, become a “utility,” supplying nurturing and progeny to the men; however, as in the case of the oven, they, too, by the very process of being enshrined are thereby weakened. Therefore, ironically, the enshrinement actually causes the females to require the protection foisted upon them by the men, and, as Morrison notes, it is a process which destroys what it sought to protect. We see this hazard when the men of Ruby rush to defend their town by slaughtering innocent women; if word of the slaughter gets out to neighboring towns, investigations and arrests would surely decimate the founding fathers’ numbers, weakening the foundations upon which the town was built.

The interaction between Deacon and Soane is representative of the town’s endorsement of clearly gendered roles. When Deacon finally comes home, interrupting Soane’s thoughts and behaving just as she had predicted, “toss[ing] his sack on the floor” (105), their conversation gives us insight into the dynamics of their relationship. Soane is expected to be submissive, and in many ways, she is. She instantly picks his dirty boots off the floor and places them on the back porch. Next, she puts on coffee, as per Deacon’s request/command. He begins to relate to her the news from town, telling her that K.D. (their nephew) was probably out “chasing tail” and asks her, “‘Member that gal dragged herself in town some time back and was staying out to that Convent?” (105). Here, we get to see the very different point of view that Morrison’s male and female
characters have. Soane objects to Deacon use of the word “dragging”: “Why you say ‘dragged’? Why you have to say ‘dragged’ like that? You see her?” (105). She recognizes the pejorative nature of that word choice and undermines his authority by questioning his ability to pronounce judgement on a woman he hadn’t even seen. When Deacon argues that his word is valid because “other folks did [see her and apparently made a report],” Soane refuses to let the matter drop, urging him to further defend his weak position by prompting him with “and?” At this point, clearly at a loss, Deacon simply refuses to admit defeat and decides to undermine her point by dismissing it, infantilizing Soane and making further demands upon her: “And nothing. Coffee, baby. Coffee, coffee” (105). When Soane persists in making her point, telling him not to use the word “dragged,” he tosses his clothes on the floor and pretends to give in to her wishes by substituting the word “floated.” Soane recognizes his challenge and chides him for his slovenliness and further demands he defend his choice of “floated.” He justifies “floated” by retorting that she came into town in six-inch heel shoes—clearly, to him, the benchmark of an easy woman.

Their conversation exemplifies the disparity in the way the men and women of Ruby perceive events. When Soane notes that the woman’s presence at the convent assures her of some level of safety, Deacon takes the opportunity to warn his wife about the evil influences of the convent women; what Soane views as comforting, Deacon declares dangerous. When their conversation takes a turn toward financial topics concerning the townspeople, Deacon accuses the women of Ruby of putting Roger out of business by going into other towns to shop. Of course, Deacon is conveniently ignoring the real reason Roger is struggling—the men of Ruby have shunned him because he
married a light-skinned woman. Deacon attributes Roger’s financial losses to hard times in general, and when Soane disagrees by saying, “I don’t understand, Deacon,” he assumes that she is merely admitting she is the stereotypical woman who can’t be made to understand complicated topics like economics. “I do,” He smiled up at her. ‘You don’t have to’” (107). And so, with smug self-assurance, Deacon ends the conversation, not realizing, Morrison points out, that Soane “had not meant that she didn’t understand what he was talking about. She’d meant she didn’t understand why he wasn’t worried enough by their friends’ money problems to help them out” (107). Soane is taking a “feminine” view of finances, trying to find what would be best emotionally for the whole “family,” whereas Deacon is taking the “masculine” bottom-line view of the businessman, interested only in profit. Soane wants her husband to concern himself with his friends’ well-being, not the potential profit to be made by lending money.

In order to continue in these contentious relationships, Ruby’s women have created coping mechanisms, one of which is ignoring the conflict and changing the subject when it creates strife. Instead of dwelling on her husband’s disappointing behavior, Soane chooses instead to stop arguing with him and focus instead on his handsome face, remarking that “shooting well that morning had settled him and returned things to the way they ought to be. Coffee the right color; the right temperature. And later today, quail without their brains would melt in his mouth” (107), just as the now symbolically brainless Soane “melts” in his physical presence. Soane’s behavior with her husband—avoiding direct confrontation yet managing to make herself heard and finding ways to live her life as she sees fit—is reminiscent of the way slaves undermined the power and control of their masters—feigning outward compliance while secretly going against their dictums. One
element of this technique—avoiding direct confrontation and employing begging and pleading instead—is illustrated in the efforts of the townswomen to seek medical aid for Patricia’s mother as she struggled with childbirth. Although the women had scorned this woman because of her light skin, they were able to overcome their aversion when the helpless woman became endangered by birth complications that could result in her death. Fairy DuPres, Lone, Dovey Morgan, and Charity Flood went door to door, walking miles, begging for a ride to the convent to get help. The men, however, refused them, and the woman dies. Her death demonstrates the complete lack of control the women of Ruby have over their lives. This pattern is repeated later in the novel, when Lone overhears the men planning to attack the convent women. Although she manages to pull together a group of men and women who attempt to keep another tragedy from occurring, unfortunately, once again, as in the case of Patricia’s mother, they are too late. The polarity of the sexes in Ruby is clearly more than symbolic; it is a life-and-death matter.

Perhaps it is because Patricia grew up light-skinned and without the benefit of having her mother that she is able to stand aloof from others in the town and take on characteristics that would normally be considered “masculine.” Patricia is the only person in this novel who comes close to suggesting a bigendered character. First, consider her name. “Patricia” is the feminine version of “Patrick” (often shortened to the gender-neutral “Pat”) and is also closely related to the noun “patriarch,” “the father and ruler of a family or tribe.” We suspect that Patricia is proud of the strength of her name, for she notes with scorn that one family “took seven births . . . to get around to giving a female child an administrative, authoritative-sounding name” (191). Nonetheless, in spite of her “strong” name, Patricia does not rule her community and is, in fact, like other bigendered
characters, somewhat separate from her “tribe.” She attributes this separation to the townspeople’s dislike for her lighter-colored skin, believing they still wish to punish her father for being “the first to violate the blood rule” (195) by marrying a light-skinned woman. In an attempt to overcome this prejudice against her and join the community, Patricia admits to marrying Billy Cato, an “eight-rock” man, a descendant of “blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (193). Unfortunately, Billy died, forcing Patricia to take her “lightish but not whiteish baby” (199) and move back into her banished father’s house. (This situation parallels Pilate’s numerous attempts to join communities only to be spurned because of the “sin” of her parents—her lack of an umbilical cord.) Immediately, the townspeople let her know her position by addressing her once again by her maiden name, “so short was the time [she] was Pat Cato” (199).

However, like the tomboys who find empowerment in climbing trees, Patricia finds strength in creating/birthing her community’s family tree. This self-appointed task of recording the lineage of every one of her neighbors allows her to at least symbolically join her tribe. The women from whom she must glean her information recognize the power this project gives her, sometimes refusing her the details she requests: “Parents complained about their children being asked to gossip, to divulge what could be private information, secrets, even . . . The women narrowed their eyes before smiling and offering to freshen her coffee. Invisible doors closed, and the conversation turned to weather” (187). Increasingly, Patricia’s project began to create “bad feelings that ride the skin like pollen” when her investigations begin to undermine the “official story, elaborated from pulpits, in Sunday school classes and ceremonial speeches” (188). Although Patricia’s
project of mapping the community’s family tree is on that, on the surface, could serve to reinforce the town’s unity, she discovers that ironically, it serves instead to highlight the many rifts within the town’s families.

Like Pilate, Pat is given a peripheral position in her community and is begrudgingly given a modicum of respect; she is allowed to teach the 8-rock children as long as she does not threaten the “official story.” Patricia feels she has a clear understanding of her position within the community. She notes to herself that although the journey of the townspeople to this location had allowed them to rid themselves of the white folk (the “dung”) and bury some of it (Patricia’s mother), “some of it is still aboveground, instructing their grandchildren in a level of intelligence their elders will never acquire” (202). Thus, even though she maintains a low position in her community, Patricia realizes that it gives her the opportunity to employ subversive power over the children of those who oppressed her mother and would oppress her. By trying to pin down the facts of the town’s heritage, she calls into question and subverts the town’s preferred mythology, a mythology that the town has utilized to cover up a multitude of sins. For example, through her research, Patricia uncovers the many rifts between the various family factions in Ruby, rifts that, because unacknowledged by those who experienced them, are therefore declared nonexistent. Patricia’s research gives her the power to deny the validity of the “official” story and annihilate the comfortable myth that the community of Ruby is unified and harmonious. This power apparently terrifies the citizens of Ruby, who perhaps fear that admitting faults will weaken the community. They fear her enough to make Patricia an outcast, but Patricia embraces her outcast position, bringing it to Richard Misner’s attention when he asks her to intercede in a family feud:
"This community used to be as tight as wax."

"It still is. In a crisis. But they keep to themselves otherwise."

"Don't you mean 'we'? 'We keep to ourselves'?"

"If I did, would you be asking me to explain things?" (207)

As Virginia Woolf and numerous other feminists have noted, because education is empowering, being well-educated has traditionally been associated with masculinity. During this conversation, Patricia begins to feel Misner is questioning her ability to adequately teach the children about their African heritage. Patricia fends off his criticism by turning the tables and calling his masculinity into question:

"Oh, please, Reverend. Don't go sentimental on me."

"If you cut yourself off from the roots, you'll wither."

"Roots that ignore the branches turn into termite dust."

"Pat," he said with mild surprise. "You despise Africa."

"No, I don't. It just doesn't mean anything to me."

"What does, Pat? What does mean something to you?"

"The periodic chart of elements and valences."

"Sad," he said. "Sad and cold." Richard Misner turned away. (209)

Although on the surface Misner is criticizing Pat for what he sees as a lack of interest in her cultural heritage, he is possibly more appalled over her lack of respect for his ideas. As African-American feminists have noted, African-American men, especially those involved in the church, spent a great deal of effort during the Civil Rights movement in ensuring that they, not the women, led the community. Patricia openly ridicules his idea and lets him know that he is not the only person who has given thought to Africa and
current political thought: “I just don’t believe some stupid devotion to a foreign
country—and Africa is a foreign country, in fact it’s fifty foreign—is a solution for these
kids.” Richard responds in a patronizing manner, insisting that “Africa is our home, Pat,
whether you like it or not” (210). A few minutes later, while watching the town’s special
reenactment of the birth of Christ (a story which they fashion into a reenactment of their
rejection by the other Black towns, the “disallowing”), Richard has to admit that he
doesn’t have a solid understanding of the people he is attempting to serve. Instead of
further antagonizing Patricia, he finally allows himself to be instructed by her: “Well, help
me figure this place out. I know I’m an outsider, but I’m not an enemy.” Patricia
responds with the bitter “truth” as she sees it, from the vantage point of her personal
experience: “No, you’re not. But in this town those two words mean the same thing”
(212).

With the tension between these two well-meaning characters, Morrison is pointing
once again to the conflict that gender roles can ignite. Patricia is certain that Misner is
talking down to her, and she assumes this because she has been surrounded by men in her
community who have consistently undervalued their women. Her defensive position
prevents her from truly understanding Misner’s motivation, to preserve the memory of
“the ordinary folk [who advanced the civil rights movement], . . . the grandmother who
kept all the babies so the mothers could march; the backwoods women with fresh towels
in one hand and a shotgun in the other” (212). Ironically, although both Patricia and
Richard are engaged in the same passion of preserving the history of their people, they
cannot see that reality because they are too involved with either embracing or rejecting
their gender roles. Patricia attacks Richard’s patronizing tone: “You preaching,
Reverend.” He finally seems to understand Patricia’s resistance to his message (or his
delivery of it) and responds, “No, I’m talking to you, Pat. I’m talking to you” (213). By
treating Patricia as an equal, she is finally able to hear his message and ask herself why
“she [had] defended people and things and ideas with a passion she did not feel” (214).
She realizes that she has treated him just as horribly as the townspeople have treated her
by “close[ing] him out to anything but the obvious, the superficial”; Patricia chides herself,
noting “and I of all people know exactly what it feels like. Not good enough to be
represented by eight-year-olds on a stage” (216).

Ashamed of her behavior, Patricia takes a drastic step to distance herself from the
townspeople whose behavior is affecting her own. In a cleansing ritual, she burns lavender
and all of her detailed genealogical records. After destroying her years of hard work, “she
felt clean” and begins laughing at the audacity of her townspeople: “Did they really think
they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who?” (217).
Patricia tries to imagine what sort of “deal” the 8-rocks had made with God to allow them
so much pride. “Suddenly Pat thought she knew all of it. Unadulterated and unadulteried
8-rock held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their
deal. For immortality. Pat’s smile was crooked. In that case, she thought, everything that
worries them must come from women” (217). Pat has discovered the root of the men’s
hatred of the women; these wives, sisters, aunts and nieces have the power to break the
men’s covenant with God. The men of Ruby fear this power and seek to limit it by
controlling the lives and reproduction of their females. And because they cannot continue
the facade of chivalry and pedestal building by openly attacking their own women, the men
instead project their fear and hatred upon the women of the convent. By attacking them,
the men can vent their pent-up emotions and use the convent women as a cautionary tale for the women of Ruby.

The convent women threaten the men of Ruby on many levels. Most obviously, because the women have “no male mission to control them” (233), they have far more power than do the women of Ruby. Second, their sexual powers frighten the men. Perceived as whores, they threaten the racial purity of Ruby. Perhaps even more distressing to the men is the threat of women who fully own their sexuality. This is seen in the illicit relationship between Consolata and Soane’s husband, Deacon. Morrison focuses all the attention of this sexual union on Consolata’s awakening. In fact, the name of her lover is never mentioned in the passages; the reader must figure out who he is. Morrison tells us that Consolata is not a virgin; she had been subjected to “dirty pokings” when she was nine (228). However, her affair with Deacon is her first willing union with a man, and she embraces it with such passion she startles her lover when she has the audacity to bite his lip during lovemaking. From that time on, Deacon perceives her only as “a woman bent on eating him like a meal” (239) and begins to neglect her. Clearly, he feels threatened by Consolata’s sexual power.

The men see the women living in the convent as a challenge to their need to control their women’s reproduction, for the men of Ruby are convinced the convent is little more than an abortion clinic. Ironically, the reverse is true. The convent women are seeking refuge from the harsh treatment they have received at the hands of men, and when a young Ruby woman, Arnette, comes to them for an abortion, they attempt instead (unsuccessfully) to save the life of her baby after Arnette attempts to abort it herself. In
fact, Consolata is able to use a “gift” of reviving the dead and actually brings Scout (Deacon and Soane’s son) back to life after he is killed in a car crash.

Although the convent becomes a sort of haven for women, because its existence threatens the men of Ruby, its ability to remain one is just as tenuous as that of the town of Haven. What upsets the men of Ruby the most about the convent is its total rejection of all things masculine. The building itself is an incarnation of this idea. Originally built and owned by an embezzler, it is heavily decorated by lascivious statues of objectified nude females. Later purchased by the Catholic church and given to nuns to run as a school for Arapaho girls the property is modified. Nude statues are replaced with religious iconography; statues of the Virgin Mary replace the nymphs, but since the nuns do not manage to remove all traces of the original statuary, the building is a concrete symbol of the virgin/whore syndrome. When the convent closes down and the last nun dies, the property falls into the care of Consolata, who was reared by the nuns and is indoctrinated in the Catholic religion but whomever takes the veil. She then becomes a living symbolic reflection of neither/nor nature of the building, as she quickly ceases to adhere to the (masculine) Church’s teachings and begins a life which deeply involves her with a close, feminine/pagan, relationship with the earth. Consolata earns money by selling baked goods and produce, especially herbs and fiercely-hot peppers from her well-tended gardens, activities of nurturing and cooking which are traditionally associated with the feminine/pagan. Consolata’s alignment with nature is exemplified in her sexual awakening, vis-à-vis an affair with a married man. That Consolata experiences no moral qualms about her behavior suggests that she views her newly-discovered sexual appetite as a natural phenomenon, no more shocking than her peppers’ need for water. Slowly, the
convent begins to fill with the rejected women of society, and Consolata inadvertently becomes a mother figure to them all.

When the people of Ruby discover the rejected women congregating at the convent, myths concerning them begin to flourish. The convent becomes the scapegoat on which all the sins of the fathers are thrust: “Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year’s Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common” (11). The community refuses to take responsibility for its own actions that may have caused these events, finding it far easier instead to place the blame on the convent women.

Once Deacon rejects Consolata, she is able to remove herself from all masculine authority. Like Katherine Ann Porter’s character Granny Weatherall, Consolata begins to feel that God has jilted her. And like Granny Weatherall, Consolata decides to return the favor in kind by rejecting the patriarchal Catholic faith with its masculine god/lover: “Where is the rest of the days, the aisle of thyme, the scent of veronica you promised? The cream and honey you said I had earned? The happiness that comes of well-done chores, the serenity duty grants us, the blessings of good works? Was what I did for love of you so terrible?” (251). After feeling the pain of rejection, Consolata at first tries to kill herself with alcohol, but finally comes out of her stupor and takes command of the women. She removes her love from the masculine realm and recenters it in a more female-centered religion, paganism, becoming a “new and revised Reverend Mother” (265), with an emphasis on mother. She promises the women, “I will teach you what you are hungry
for” (262). She quits feeling guilty about using her magical power to bring people back to life, a power which she had once feared went against the church’s teaching. Her feminine paganist beliefs are a direct challenge to masculine authority. For example, she begins to use her new consciousness to instruct the women around her in pagan ceremonies designed to affirm the feminine self and reject the traditional masculine standards by which women have been judged. In this new economy, women are not longer easily divided into the virgin/whore dichotomy. These women—previously labeled whores and found to be unacceptable—instead become, under Consolata’s tutelage, merely humans who have reacted to the forces of a world which does not value them. Sometimes their reactions have been for the better, sometimes for the worse. This philosophy, of course, is exactly the opposite of what the women in Ruby have been taught; they know they are judged solely by a masculine standard, a standard which often hinges upon one vital issue: maintaining one’s virginity until marriage and remaining a wifely chastity afterwards. However, Consolata worships not the Father, but the Mother. With a female-centered world view, one which removes the male gaze and presence, the virgin/whore dichotomy can no longer be sustained, for after all, ironically, it is men who make whores possible. If the power to name is taken from the men and given to the women, new definitions must necessarily be forged. Consolata teaches her new disciples “dreaming,” which involves coloring templates of themselves on the basement floor and filling them in with the events of their painful lives. Consolata “preaches” a new woman-centered gospel, praising the woman who nurtured and protected her:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My
flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s daughter. Mary is the daughter of Eve.” (263)

With its images of female-to-female love, this passage clearly establishes feminine authority and a rejection of the masculine. No longer is there reference to the Father and Son; the formula is now a mother begetting the daughter who then paradoxically begets the mother, a holy trinity replaced with a holy/wholly feminine duo. These new rites strengthen the once-victimized women of the convent. As Morrison points out, an outside observer might note a change in the Convent women, who “were no longer haunted”; however, this very independence is exactly what threatens the women’s survival, for, as Morrison notes, the outside observer might think the women were not “hunted, either... But there she would have been wrong” (266). Shortly after the convent women declare their independence from masculine authority, they are murdered by the men of Ruby.

Since its publication, Paradise has come under some criticism, especially for the “touchy-feely” passages of Consolata’s new philosophy. Although dancing, naked women singing in the rain may be viewed as female-affirming, they also run the risk of seeming ridiculous. Even the most stalwart feminists may sometimes feel uncomfortable with the perceived extremity of their menses-worshipping, placenta-saving sisters. Some critics
argue there are simply too many characters in this novel, none of them given enough attention to make them interesting. Or perhaps it is Morrison’s theme itself that makes some of the characters in this novel flat. Because she has so sharply divided many of her characters in this novel by stereotypical gender behaviors, they seem one-dimensional. Morrison does not allow the two characters who do not fit this description—Patricia and Consolata—to dominate the novel. However, the fully-human nature of these two characters makes them more fascinating, absorbing subjects. To be interesting, characters must be complex, and to be complex, characters must embrace many facets of human possibility. However, we could argue that even a bigendered character is limited by a somewhat polarized perception; in order to be “bi,” one must establish two opposing stances. With Consolata’s pagan/multiple consciousness, we are offered a new category of gender that defies the traditional one held sacred by the people of Ruby, one that disrupts even the more radical bigendered category of Morrison’s earlier novels. Morrison gives us a category that refuses to be categorized, a non-conforming gender which is unspeakable and therefore so different it strikes fear in Ruby. Because Consolata’s community of women rejects the beliefs of Ruby’s male citizens, they can only view it as either a threat to their way of life or a loss of power. They are unwilling to let go of a world view that easily allows them to classify a woman in a short skirt as a whore, unworthy of their regard. Ruby’s men are convinced that making a space for female authority must necessarily threaten to destroy masculine authority and the community built upon it. This is why they take arms and slaughter the innocent. Once again, Morrison warns her readers against the dangers of defining the world in terms of dichotomies or
even trichotomies. She urges us to see the multiple, fluid possibilities of life, a world view which encourages concern and compassion rather than judgment and rejection.

1 In her essay in *All the Women are White*, Jacquelyn Grant sees in Black churches a "conspiracy to keep women relegated to the background" (141), discussing the church's long history of keeping women out of positions of authority in the church. She concludes that "it is only when Black women and men share jointly the leadership in theology and in the church and community that the Black nation will become strong and liberated" (149).
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

At this point in the paper, I would find it wonderfully satisfying to point to Morrison’s novels and declare that through her psychologically intersexed characters, she has written an orderly progression of arguments against hegemonic dictates for gendered roles. Unfortunately—or perhaps, more accurately, fortunately—this is impossible to do because Morrison has consistently resisted playing the role of Morality Pedant. In Playing in the Dark, Morrison proclaimed her need to “open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World” noting, however, that she wants to do so “without the mandate for conquest [and] . . . unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls” (3).

More recently, her reluctance to participate in any dogmatic “cause-of-the-day” furor is also echoed in a recent interview in Salon, an Internet magazine. When she was asked if she considered Paradise a “feminist” novel, she responded vehemently:

Not at all. I would never write any “ist.” I don’t write “ist” novels. . . .

Everything I’ve ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors. . . . I detest and loathe [those categories]. . . . I don’t subscribe to patriarchy, and I don’t think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it’s a question of equitable access, and opening of doors to all sort of things. (Zaffrey 1)

Through these statements, we can see that although Morrison is repulsed by the possibility of using her writing to “preach” to her audience, she is nonetheless compelled to point us in the direction of opening her audience’s minds to better possibilities. By
creating psychologically intersexed characters, Morrison is indeed able to open doors for “all sorts of things.” Her characters resist the heterosexual, paternal white default that attempts to dictate gender norms.

The process begins in *Sula*, for the two protagonists learn that they must become agents in their own development, rejecting the either/or, male/female dichotomies. Morrison’s resistance to offering simplistic solutions is evidenced by the novel’s ambiguous ending—Sula acquires her self-knowledge on her deathbed, and a middle-aged Nel discovers her agency only after realizing that she had given up the most important person in her life, Sula. Sadly, Nel experiences her epiphany only after Sula’s death, when it is impossible to do anything to change her earlier decision to cast off her friend. As bleak as the novel’s ending may be, Morrison hints that Nel, through her friendship with Sula that allowed her to question her socially-prescribed gender role, may indeed be more fully aware of the choices life offers, if only she has the courage to make them.

Morrison’s use of bigendered characters is further advanced in *Song of Solomon*. Although the dangers of whole-hearted acceptance of white patriarchy’s gender roles are obvious in the abysmal marriage of Milkman’s parents, Morrison refuses to present Ruth and Macon Dead merely as object lessons, instead exploring the events that formed their personalities. By introducing two bigendered characters, Pilate and Milkman, Morrison suggests that another route to authenticity is possible but not without pitfalls. Pilate’s life as a single mother (and her daughter’s) may be viewed as an improvement on Ruth and Macon’s marriage, but it is also an isolated, lonely life. Milkman’s newly “feminized” self is immediately at odds with the macho swaggering of his childhood friend, Guitar—so much so that Guitar makes the murder of his one-time best friend his life’s mission. The
novel ends with violence against the two bigendered characters; Guitar murders Pilate and attempts to also kill Milkman. As in *Sula*, the novel’s lack of a pat, happy ending points towards Morrison’s belief that she cannot offer easy answers to the problems that plague her characters (and by extension, our society), but she can, at least, open the door to different possibilities.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison at first seems to take a step backward, as the two protagonists, Jadine and Son, are both firmly mired in gender stereotypes, at least in the novel’s beginning. Although they do both make some movement toward agency in questioning gender roles, the movement is so incremental as to seem almost imperceptible. This novel—more than the others—reflects, I believe, Morrison’s own ambivalent feelings about the nature of gender. As noted before, she does harbor a personal belief that some “gendered” behaviors are innate; however, because she is not a polemicist, Morrison makes no attempt to delineate *which* behaviors are innate and which are foisted by society, at least not in her writing. Jadine and Son allow readers to examine gender roles from both sides, seeing the advantages and disadvantages following them offers. Because Jadine and Son must negotiate their gender roles with an acute awareness of how those roles are affect by race, Morrison also manages to undermine dichotomous thinking by suggesting that the issue cannot be viewed simply as an either/or proposition; factors such as race, class, heterosexuality, and even age impact our culture’s perceptions of gender roles, and *Tar Baby* suggests we must acknowledge the interplay of these factors before we can hope to fully understand them.

In *Beloved*, Morrison reaches back in time to examine more closely the role of race in forming gender expectations. Ex-slaves Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D struggle with
the unique pressures exerted on their gender identities by the forces of slavery. Sethe must become both mother and father to her children. Baby Suggs takes on not only the role of matriarch but also that of mentor to her people, a role normally held by males. In Paul D, we see a truly bigendered character; more than being just a "gentle man," Paul D embodies the "feminine." In fact, Darieck Scott, in his essay "More Man Than You'll Ever Be," suggests that Paul D can be viewed as a positive portrayal of one facet of sexuality most reviled by society—homosexuality. By creating the psychologically intersexed Paul D, Morrison succeeds in her desire to suggest new possibilities, for as Scott argues, with Paul D, Morrison “disturbs the stable meanings which congregate around the idea of the emasculation of black men, with results that are painful and, Morrison insists, potentially healing” (230).

Finally, in her latest novel, Paradise, Morrison continues to examine the forces that mold gender and to suggest ways to negotiate them without giving in completely to hegemonic expectations. Once again, Morrison plays with the notion of how closely aligned notions of race and gender are; the two cannot be separated. In Paradise, Morrison attempts to disguise the racial markers of the women at the convent, so the readers are left wondering which characters are white, which are black. This forces the readers to retreat from the race issue somewhat and focus instead on the gender concerns. However, as Morrison notes in an interview, both race and gender are important:

I used to complain bitterly that psychiatry never considered race. I remember saying that, you know, in the moment when you first realize you're a boy or a girl or your toilet training is this or whatever—all these little things that happen in your childhood—no one every talks about the moment you found that
you were white. Or the moment you found out you were black. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything. And it’s a profound psychological moment. (Jaffery 3)

Her words here help to explain Morrison’s “stake” in exploring both race and gender issues, in urging her audience to look towards the “wider landscape” to allow for new possibilities: these two aspects of being are so closely aligned as to be inseparable.

By allowing for a reconsideration of gender and gender expectations, Morrison speaks to an urgent issue without preaching upon it. Although she does not declare allegiance to the antihomophobia movement, she advances the cause by urging her audience to question old assumptions and look into their hearts for possible answers. Although nobody would call Morrison a “Queer writer,” her novels resonate with themes explored in the Les/bi/gay/transgender communities. Cheryl Clarke has criticized the “black macho intellectuals [who] have absorbed the homophobia of the patriarchal slavemasters,” referring to this homophobia as “the failure to ‘transform’” (34), a failure which all too often sets black against black. Homophobic attitudes, Clarke argues, “prevent the liberation of the total being” (43). Barbara Smith refers to homophobia as “the great divide” and urges us to close it “by working toward an unbreakable unity, a bond across races, nationalities, sexual orientations, and classes (“Blacks and Gays” 22). Cathy J. Cohen and Tamara Jones advocate “intersectional politics” presented by feminists such as those in the Combahee River Collective to examine “the ways in which race, sexuality, gender, class, citizenship status, and other significant social dimensions all combine to define the experiences, identities, and political challenges of black people” (98), declaring that “fighting homophobia and heterosexism should be at the center of any
black social justice politico" (97). Morrison’s open-ended examinations of gender roles do in fact lead her readers to see the “intersectional” forces behind our gender assumptions. She puts her bigendered characters in a state of flux, resisting dichotomous categories of male/female. And, just as Paula C. Rust predicts, this movement away from dichotomies forces a chain-reaction of changes: “As old terms disappear or alter in meaning and new terms develop, individuals find that their sexual identities no longer describe their locations accurately, and they must search the language for new ways to identify themselves” (67). That an essay on Morrison is included in the recently-published collection Dangerous Liaisons: Blacks, Gays, and the Struggle for Equality speaks volumes on the effect Morrison’s work is having on changing perceptions on gender. Although her bigendered characters may have lost their old “locations” on the cultural landscape, Morrison does indeed open up a wider landscape, allowing them the freedom to search for new identities and giving them a new language that more accurately reflects the authentic individuals they are striving to become.
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