"Otherness": Defining the African American Male and Female and Analyzing the Relationship Between Public Racism and Strained Private Lives in Toni Morrison's Novels *Sula* and *Home*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Toni Morrison, born February 18, 1931, is known for her literature that analyzes the male and female black experience. Her fiction is raw, powerful and painfully honest, diving into the deepest crevices of her characters' minds as they face racism, violence, and never-ending judgment. As their outer shell is beaten and cracked, their inner voice and confidence suffers, their spirit morphed and transformed into something dark and vulnerable, a semblance of a self rather than a healthy and happy individual. Before further introducing my thesis topic, it is important to know about the woman who used the genre of fiction to highlight the intense struggles of the black community in United States history.

Morrison was born and raised in Lorain, Ohio. In a 1985 interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison described Ohio as "an interesting and complex state. It has both a southern and northern disposition. The northern part of the state had underground railway stations and a history of black people escaping into Canada, but the southern part of the state is as much Kentucky as there is, complete with cross burnings."[1] Morrison's upbringing in a state that was divided in its approach or lack of approach to racial acceptance gave Morrison a unique outlook on the African American experience, inspiring her to write books that specifically involve the topic of racism. Literary scholar Linden Peach articulates the purpose of Morrison's novels, stating that Morrison emphasizes the "pursuit of individual advancement by black people in a white-determined nation [and the] reclamation of black solidarity based upon, to use [Morison's

[1] Peach, Linden, *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 3. Print.

own] words from *Beloved* 'rememory' of slavery and white America's continual denial of black people."[2] Morrison is the first African American woman to receive a Nobel Prize in Literature. She has published ten novels as well as short fiction, non-fiction, and children's stories. She earned her B.A. at Howard University in 1953 and her M.A. at Cornell University in 1955. Morrison taught at Texas Southern University from 1955-1957 and then worked as an editor at Random House, one of the most successful publishing companies in the United States, for 20 years before retiring in 1984. She continued to be involved in education after leaving Random House and also continued to write. Her latest novel, *Home*, was published in 2012, the same year Morrison was awarded The Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Barack Obama.[3]

Morrison's novels have reached a wide and multicultural audience despite her very specific and primary focus on African American history and culture. Oprah Winfrey, one of the most prominent and respected female African American public figures in the world, recommended Morrison's books for "Oprah's Book Club." Morrison's writing greatly moved Oprah's fans, whom stem from various races, religions, sexual orientations and economic backgrounds. Morrison's first appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey's talk show, was in 1996. Winfrey helped to expand Morrison's audiences leading to a dramatic increase in book sales. Literary scholar John Young explains: "Winfrey's commercial power suspended the publishing industry's field of normative whiteness, enabling Morrison to reach a broad, popular audience while being marketed as

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[2] Peach, Linden, *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 4. Print.
[3] CNN Library, "Toni Morrison Fast Facts - CNN.com." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 28 Feb. 2014. Web. 07 Jan. 2015.

artistically important."[4] Oprah bridged the gap between the white market and the black writer. Morrison's books, written for the African American community, now held new meaning in the hands of the white community. Books such as the Nobel Prize winning *Song of Solomon* (1977), received the coveted "Oprah's Book Club" stamp on the front cover, a physical representation of Morrison's celebrity status and success. White readers were given the opportunity to attempt to understand or at the very least observe the struggles of the black community in American history, primarily through the eyes of female characters. Morrison's words were therefore able to affect an unintended audience. Winfrey recalls going on vacation with friends, all of whom were white. They read Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and cried, "asking [Winfrey] if this is what life was really like as a colored child."[5] The relationship between Winfrey and Morrison inspired a new dialogue between the white and black communities, discussing sensitive topics of racism, rape, violence, and gender inequality.

This thesis will focus on *Sula* (1973) and *Home* (2012). I chose these two novels because they allow the reader to analyze both gender perspectives as well as explore various time periods in American history. *Sula* is set mostly in the 1920s and1930s, referencing the Post World War I era. *Home* is set in the 1950s and follows the life of a Korean War veteran. Both novels are therefore set during difficult times, times where communities are attempting to heal after trauma and loss of life. However, Morrison emphasizes that violence is not only present on battlefields, but on street corners, on trains, in backyards and in homes. There are no designated areas of violence or

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[4] Young, John, "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences." *African American Review*, Vol. 35, Number 2, 181. 2001. Web.
[5] Young, John, "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences." *African American Review*, Vol. 35, Number 2, 181. 2001. Web.

guaranteed areas of safety. This is especially true for the African American community. The word "community" itself is tarnished since the African American community in these novels is hanging by a thin thread, desperate to stay intact but struggling in the face of certain violence and their uncertain future. As the white community's racism turns into violent actions, the black community loses control of their own personal relationships. Families are affected and struggle to simply survive. It is not only these personal relationships that are questioned but the concept of gender identity as well since the African American male and the African American female cannot be easily compared to their white counterparts. They face a whole other set of challenges that affects both how society views them and how they view themselves.

It is imperative to have an understanding of the time periods Morrison writes about before diving into her novels, especially in regards to racial relations and violence. Historian Numan V. Bartley writes of 1930s America, stating that a large number of southerners considered themselves politically liberal. However, once President Truman took office in 1945, the south felt threatened by his administration's demands. Bartley explains how "Supreme Court decisions and policies pursued by the Truman administration directly [challenged] institutional white supremacy. Concern[s] for the preservation of the 'southern way of life' became part of the general shift toward conservatism."[6] Faced with ideas of integration, southerners rebelled, publically defending their traditions through the destruction of property and even violence.

Historian Kimberley L. Phillips describes how African Americans faced violence both abroad and in their home states, fighting in wars for a country that did not appreciate

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[6] Bartley, Numan V. *The Rise of Massive Resistance; Race and Politics in the South during the 1950's*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1969. 28. Print.

or accept them. African Americans were instead viewed as inferior lives that could easily be spared in war. Philips writes how "the efforts of African Americans to withstand the violence *within* the military were as significant as their efforts to endure the horrors of combat."[7] African American soldiers were not only at war with the foreign enemy, but they were at war with their fellow Americans, viewed as foreign enemies by those holding onto the concept of white supremacy. African American poet Langston Hughes wrote a column for *The Chicago Defender*. In an article published in October 1945, Hughes argued the following: "White-Negro relations are a national problem affecting both civilian and military life. It illustrates how the army has helped to worsen these relations."[8] The trauma of warfare was intensified by the trauma of racial violence. Phillips adds that African American "soldiers and veterans were assaulted, shot, and lynched" after World War II.[9] In fact, it was not until 1952 that the United States would go a full year without any recorded lynchings. However, this is not to suggest that none occurred in secret. *The Chicago Tribune*, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Tuskegee Institute kept their own records of lynchings starting in 1882. Their records show that between 1882 and 1952 4,726 people

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[7] Phillips, Kimberley L. *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2012. 65. Print.

[8] Hughes, Langston, "Here to Yonder: North, South, and the Army," *The Chicago Defender*, 27 October 1945, 12.

[9] Phillips, Kimberley L. *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2012. 66. Print.

were lynched in the United States. Out of all the victims, an overwhelming 3,431 were African American.[10]

Lynching was not the only example of the violent consequences of white supremacy. White bus drivers and police officers shot black soldiers and veterans in the streets. The NAACP urged for a national investigation but was told that those who were shot acted in a manner that caused their death. The shooters claimed that the victims participated in "some form of 'loud talking' or cursing, a charge particular to African Americans that dated back to the post-Civil War South and resulted in their arrests or deadly assaults…"[11] White members of the community wished to push and provoke black soldiers as hard as possible in order to get a reaction and a so-called reason to pull the trigger.

Historian Alan Lightman sites a specific example of the intense and inappropriate punishments African American soldiers received for refusing to follow orders that a white soldier would never be asked to do. Black soldiers were violently disciplined and sentenced to prison or even death when their superiors felt such punishments were justified. Lightman references Lieutenant Leon Gilbert who on July 31, 1950 refused to allow his men to complete a mission he deemed would result in certain death. Gilbert was sentenced to death but "because of an outcry by the black press and the national black community, Gilbert's sentence was eventually reduced to twenty

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[10] "First Year in 70 Years With No Reported Lynchings in the United States." *A History of Racial Injustice*. Equal Justice Initiative, http://racialinjustice.eji.org/timeline/1950s/, Web. 11 Jan. 2015.

[11] Phillips, Kimberley L. *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2012. 90. Print.

years in prison."[12] Although black soldiers expected to join an integrated army when they enlisted during the Korean War, they instead faced the usual segregation. The army felt that is was unnecessary to "abandon its 'Negro Policy' since Executive Order 9981 did not explicitly call for the military's desegregation."[13] Although the American enemy had changed between World War II and the Korean War, the internal workings of the United States Army had mostly stayed stagnant in its practices of equality or lack thereof. This information will be important to keep in mind when discussing *Home*.

Segregation was a popular tool, particularly in the south. The 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision that promoted the integration of public schools caused uproar from whites who wished for the black community to stay in isolation. In March of 1956, "The Southern Manifesto on Integration," created by Virginia Senator Harry Byrd, was signed by 101 southern congressmen. The manifesto claimed that integration would be harmful to the community as a whole and would negatively impact both races. The document stated that segregation would threaten and violate the "habits, traditions, and way of life" for the white community. The document continued, stating that segregation would "[destroy] the amicable relations between the white and Negro races that have been created through 90 years of patient effort by the good people of both races."[14] However, as expressed in this chapter, we know that such "amicable relations" were not

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[12] Lightman, Alan, "Race, Art, and Integration: The Image of the African American Soldier in Popular Culture During the Korean War," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Autumn, 2003), 34.
[13] Phillips, Kimberley L. *War! What Is It Good For?: Black Freedom Struggles and the U.S. Military from World War II to Iraq*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina, 2012. 114. Print.
[14] "The Southern Manifesto," *A History of Racial Injustice*. Equal Justice Initiative, http://racialinjustice.eji.org/timeline/1950s/, Web. 14 Jan. 2015.

the norm in society. The purpose of the manifesto was not to benefit both races, but to benefit the one deemed superior.

Racism even affected romantic relationships; a major example of this is the story of Richard and Mildred Loving. The interracial couple married in Washington, D.C. in 1958 before returning to their home state of Virginia. Richard's decision to marry an African American woman was viewed not only as inappropriate in the eyes of Virginians, but also illegal. The couple was arrested and later pleaded guilty to their "crime." They were ordered to leave the state of Virginia for 25 years. The Judge who heard their case, Judge Leon Bazile, "condemned the Lovings' marriage and declared that God's decision to place the races on different continents demonstrated a divine intent to avoid intermarriage."[15] The couple continued to fight the law, urging politicians and society at large to understand the cruelty of stopping people from loving and marrying whomever they wish. Finally, in 1967, the couple successfully won a United States Supreme Court case that deemed prohibiting interracial marriage unconstitutional.

By citing examples in the military, in schools, and on the street, I have emphasized the unfair obstacles and gruesome, violent harassment African Americans faced on a regular basis. This historical background compliments Morrison's writings, for her novels show and discuss the innermost fears and thoughts of African American men and women as they attempt to navigate their way through a patriarchal, white world. As society heavily critiques and judges the African American community, the community begins to critique and judge each other. African American women desperately try to escape the pressures society places upon them by searching for a sense of independence

[15] "Richard and Mildred Loving Plead Guilty to Crime of Interracial Marriage," http://racialinjustice.eji.org/timeline/1950s/, Web. 17 Jan. 2015.

and sexual freedom. The female characters in Morrison's novels wish to make their own choices instead of simply following instructions, an understandable desire. However, due to their constant oppressive state, their few choices in life are sometimes made in a spontaneous fashion and lack proper thought or guidance. This then leads to further judgment and ridicule from their community. Meanwhile, African American men face their own societal expectations, particularly in regards to keeping up the proper public persona of a tough, strong, and rigid man who lacks "feminine emotions." However, Morrison emphasizes the need for men to show emotion and how it is only natural to be vulnerable, for emotion is something that is human rather than gender-oriented.

Morrison's works discuss the overall motif of "otherness." African Americans, regardless of gender, are seen as outsiders in Morrison's novels, unable to be accepted members of their communities due to a physical trait. Morrison spoke about her own experience with racism in *The Guardian* (1987): "Thinking on it now I suppose I was backward, but I never longed for social integration with white people. For a place to pee when shopping, yes, but I was prey to the racism of my early years in Lorain where the only truly interesting people to me were the black people."[16] The feeling of "otherness" and isolation compelled Morrison to amplify the voices of those drowned in unsettling and unfair silence.

Morrison greatly emphasizes the "disruptive presence of Africans in America" throughout her novels, stressing that black people were viewed as burdens rather than citizens.[17] Literary scholar Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber describes the intent and consequences

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[16] Peach, Linden, *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 5. Print.
[17] Fultz, Lucille P., *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 19. Print.

of "othering" in Western culture, stating how "racial 'othering' equates 'whiteness' with agency, privilege, and power."[18] By ostracizing an entire group of people categorized only by a physical trait, the white community held its reign over the minority and maintained control, both physically and socially.

The concept of white supremacy was linked to the belief of destiny—that one race was intended to rule the rest. Something as simple as a darker skin tone determined to what extent a person would be educated and employed. Even in the 21st century, skin color is still a constant reminder of difference, "a physical terrain and within the black psyche, a constant reminder to African Americans of their difference and otherness."[19] Unlike personality traits, economic background, and sexual orientation, race can be identified by one simple glance at another individual. Inaccurate and ignorant assumptions can then be deduced, leading to a feeling of misrepresentation and "otherness." Morrison analyzes the African American community in a manner that shows the inevitable consequences of such practices.

Literary scholar Tessa Roynon explores a fascinating idea that relates to the division in society that Morrison investigates in her novels. Roynon compares Greek mythology to Morrison's works, specifically *Home*. I will dive into her complex arguments more heavily in the appropriate chapter, but one thought she articulates is general and suitable for the current discussion. Roynon writes of the privileges the white community possesses that are culturally passed down from Ancient Greek and Roman principles. Roynon writes that "as an American, [Morrison] is purportedly a beneficiary

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[18] *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*. Ed. Lucille P. Fultz. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 93. Print

[19] Fultz, Lucille P., *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. University of Illinois Press Urbana and Chicago, 2003. 20. Print.

of the legacy of Greece and Rome, but as an African American she is alienated from that inheritance and from the dominant cultural institutions or processes (such as law, government, education, and historiography) that it underpins."[20] Therefore, clear division and separate definition exists between what it means to be an American and what it means to be an African American. In American history, the United States has always been considered the "land of the free" but this motto only truly applied to those who were deemed worthy of such freedoms, meaning the dominant race. Although there was progress, such as the transition from Africans being considered legal property to Africans slowly acquiring a sense of an American identity, independent from previous masters, violence and social inequalities still existed throughout the time periods of Morrison's novels. Oppression presented itself in many forms and was always expected. Literary scholar Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber lists the various origins of trauma: "physical abuse, dehumanization, discrimination, exclusion, [and] abandonment." However, she continues by arguing that trauma exists "in successive generations," meaning that the expectation of trauma is passed down from parent to child as if DNA labeled "otherness."[21]

The second chapter will focus on defining the African American female identity in *Sula*. I will discuss how such definitions are heavily based on community standards, complicating the manner in which these women view themselves. I will also comment on how these characters view their communities and society as a whole. Similar themes will be explored in the third chapter; this chapter will define the African American male identity in *Home*. This chapter will also analyze the role mental illness and racial

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[20] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 19. Print.
[21] Schreiber, Evelyn J. "Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison." *The Journal of African American History* (2010): ix. *Project Muse*. Web.

violence plays in the African American community. I will attempt to break down the barriers these characters put up as a defense mechanism, noting their thoughts, emotions, and explaining why they act the way they act. Each character is complex and heartbroken. Their emotional strife, failed relationships, and lack of self-assurance in some way always links back to how society views and treats their race. I will come to a conclusion in the fourth and final chapter

Chapter 2

Identifying the African American Female in *Sula*

Sula follows generations of African American women in Medallion, Ohio, such as Sula's grandmother, mother, and Sula herself. The common factor between these women is that they all suffer in their own way due to the challenges their race and gender face. They lack stability and accept this reality. Morrison discussed the culture presented in *Sula* in an interview: "black people never annihilate evil. They don't run it out of their neighborhoods…they accept it. It's almost a fourth dimension in their lives…they don't have that puritanical thing which says if you see a witch, then burn it, or if you see something, then kill it."[22] Members of the African American community, particularly those who identify as female, do not have the luxury of acting quickly and immediately eradicating any known threats. Instead, these women view suffering as the backdrop to life, the presence in the room that is and always will be there in some form. One particular sentiment in *Sula* compliments Morrison's discussion of this culture and way of thinking perfectly: "They did not believe doctors could heal—for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate."[23] The sorrows they experience are described as both unavoidable and final.

Sula is meant to embrace and empower the African American woman by using a literary platform to acknowledge these challenges. Morrison explains in an interview with Robert Stepto that "black women have held, have been given…the cross. They don't

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[22] Fultz, Lucille P, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. University of Illinois Press Urbana and Chicago, 2003. 3. Print.
[23] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 74. E-book.

walk near it. They're often on it. And they've borne that, I think, extremely well."[24] *Sula* recognizes the strength of African American women and their determination to experience some form of joy, whether through friendship or romance. The characters in *Sula* are not perfect but complex and at times impulsive, making questionable decisions that cause the reader to feel frustrated and confused. It is important to analyze their actions and ask a crucial question: *Why do these women act the way they do?* Actions have consequences but they also have a starting point, a place where ideas and habits, both positive and negative, are formed. When analyzing these women, it is important to consider things like time period, childhood, family dynamics, and relationships. In a 1986 interview with Sandi Russell, Morrison emphasizes the fact that she is "writ[ing] for black women" and stresses that she is "not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving/loving way. They are writing to repossess, re-name, re-own."[25] Although male characters are present in the novel, *Sula* greatly emphasizes the female voice in the face of challenges as well as in peaceful times of self-reflection and healing. The oxymoron "unforgiving/loving" relates to Morrison's discussion of African Americans facing evil instead of running away. They are outraged, frustrated, and frightened by the unfair conditions, yet they show signs of strength and courage that cannot be ignored.

The Foreword of *Sula* introduces various critical questions that will be explored through my close analysis of the text, specifically highlighting female relationships, self-awareness, and community dynamics. Morrison poses the following questions: "What is

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[24] Fultz, Lucille P, *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. University of Illinois Press Urbana and Chicago, 2003. 46. Print.
[25] Peach, Linden, *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 14. Print.

friendship between women when unmediated by men? What choices are available for black women outside their own society's approval? What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community?"[26] This small section of the Foreword encourages a feminist reading of the text. Morrison writes with the intention of female empowerment and the hope of inspiring women to notice not only the relationship between man and woman but between female friends navigating a patriarchal society. The community for which these women live in is suffocating and stifling. Both women and men create expectations for women to follow. There is a pressure to fit a certain mold yet *Sula* includes characters that are bold and rebellious. Morrison mentions the contradictions of individualism. The community is "racially uniform" yet they are seen as different and foreign to the white community, lacking prestige, respect and other related connotations that are associated with "uniform." The African American community wishes to have a voice and to feel empowered yet this same community follows suit in labeling women as inferior, forcing them to act out at times in a desperate attempt to feel an ounce of control. These moments of rebellion may be in the form of physical violence, sexual acts, or verbal communication.

The metaphorical image of a cross appears again in the Foreword. However, this time Morrison includes details of the cross, comparing its four points to four female characters. Hannah, Nel, Eva, and Sula are all "points of a cross—each one a choice for characters bound by gender and race. Wrapped around the arms of that cross were wires of other kinds of battles—the veteran, the orphans, the husband, the laborers, confined to

[26] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 7. E-book.

a village by the same forces that mandated the struggle. And the only possible triumph was that of the imagination."[27] The women are the focal point, the main attraction while the men are in the background. They are members of society with the luxury of being born the dominant gender, but they are not dominant in Morrison's literary world, meaning they are not examined as fully and deeply as her female characters. Morrison amplifies the female voice so that the reader can finally hear, analyze, and attempt to understand the African American female identity.

We are introduced to Eva Peace through her struggles. BoyBoy, her husband, is an absent father and partner. He focuses more on self-pleasures than the responsibilities of fatherhood. BoyBoy "did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third."[28] Morrison uses the name "BoyBoy" to highlight his immaturity and lack of compassion for his family. Although he partakes in adult activities such as sex and drinking alcohol, the way in which he thinks mirrors the mind of a ill-mannered child. He does not think of the consequences of his abuse; he only thinks in the moment. Eva, distracted by the demands of being a mother, does not voice her frustrations. BoyBoy eventually walks out on his family. Morrison therefore writes of a divide between the sexes and their expected roles and behaviors in society. It is more socially acceptable and of little surprise if a man decides to redirect his attention towards another woman or another life. If a woman decides to have such agency, it is deemed inappropriate and unnatural. Eva leaves her children for eighteen months but returns "with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg."[29] She returned to her children

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[27] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 8. E-book.
[28] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 34. E-book.
[29] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 36. E-book.

with the finances to support them and to literally build a roof over their heads. Her absence was not fueled by hedonism, but by a desperate need to prosper. It is quite valid to argue that Eva's methods were unacceptable, for she lied to the children's caretaker about how long she would be gone. However, she returned to her parental responsibilities while BoyBoy did not.

One may question the reasoning behind returning to her children. Did Eva return because of her maternal instincts or did she return because of society's expectations of women? I believe she returned due to a combination of both. Morrison notes Eva's determination as a mother, such as when Plum was wailing in pain from an inability to have a bowel movement. Morrison writes of how Eva "rush[es] to him," hurrying over to comfort her child. She ultimately takes him to the outhouse and "shove[s] the last bit of food she had in the world" into his rectum, leading to a bowel movement. She sacrifices sleep and food for the well being of her child, a child referenced as "her beloved baby boy" whom she "warm[s] by her body."[30] Soon after, she leaves for eighteen months. I argue that this moment of vulnerability convinces Eva that she has to leave in order to eventually better the lives of her children. She feels hopeless, lacking support and necessary resources. She acknowledges the innocence of her child, the "baby boy" who deserves love unlike BoyBoy, the man who refused to grow up.

The influence of societal expectations is also apparent, for Eva judges other women if they do not uphold the established values of a wife and consequently, of a woman. Morrison writes of how Eva "fussed interminably with the brides of the newly wed couples for not getting their men's supper ready on time; about how to launder

[30] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 35. E-book.

shirts, press them, etc. 'Yo' man be here direc'lin. Ain't it 'bout time you got busy?'"[31] Eva expresses her support for society's expectations of a submissive and dutiful wife even though she lacks a husband of her own and has witnessed first-hand the dangers of male arrogance and control. Perhaps Eva is brainwashed or perhaps she is desperate to witness order and stability, to fit the mold of supposed normalcy. Women are expected to cook and clean. Notice how Morrison does not include the word "husbands" but instead "men," emphasizing gender rather than the concept of equal partnership/marriage. Eva loves men despite her negative experience with BoyBoy. She feels a sense of purpose and appreciation in the presence of men. She therefore surrounds herself with men and inspires her daughters to do the same. Eva enjoys the attention and the feeling of being around another who practices a semblance of authority. She entertains men, laughs with them and even shares her own thoughts, presenting arguments with "such a concentration of man-love that they felt their convictions solidified by her disagreement."[32] Eva longs for a sense of stability and meaning in her life while the men she interacts with enjoy her flirtatious and witty personality. Her relationships with the opposite sex therefore carry a mutual benefit that is still in good keeping with societal expectations since she is not physically "participat[ing] in the act of love."[33]

Plum, Eva's only male child, holds great significance in Eva's story. The last scene the reader is presented with before Eva's eighteen-month departure is Eva comforting Plum during his infancy. Morrison then writes of an older Plum who has returned from World War I. He is in poor health, traumatized by the brutal conditions of

[31] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 40. E-book.
[32] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 40. E-book.
[33] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 40. E-book.

war. He weaves in and out of consciousness due to drug use and illness, unable to grasp his current reality. Eva brings a bottle of what she believes to be strawberry crush to her lips, only to find out it is "blood-tainted water."[34] Morrison presents a polluted image through combining water and blood. The water, representing good health and proper sustenance, is contaminated due to bleeding, representing sickness and the decaying of the body. Feeling desperate and pained by witnessing the suffering of her child, she resorts to the gruesome act of setting him on fire, leading to his death. The unspeakable act is horrifying yet incredibly complex. The reader knows Eva loves Plum unconditionally, holding him during his infancy as well as his adult years after the war. However, she is responsible for his grotesque death. She greatly sins in an attempt to end his suffering but the sin cannot be forgotten due to the clear brutality of setting another person on fire. Right before being set on fire, Plum feels content, as if peacefully preparing for his death. He refers to this quiet moment as "some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing…Everything is going to be all right, it said."[35] Morrison juxtaposes the act of murder with the act of a blessing, complicating the manner in which the reader views Eva and her decision. Morrison also presents the symbol of fire that contrasts the water previously referenced. The fire turns her child to ash, cremating him and obliterating the tainted water. However, the fire also burns away a precious part of Eva's identity: her only son. Eva so greatly identifies herself as a mother as well as an ally of men. She lives for men and in this instance, destroys what she loves.

Eva is not the only Peace woman whose identity is greatly influenced by male interactions. Her daughter Hannah also clings to the pleasures men can bring, particularly

[34] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 44. E-book.
[35] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 45. E-book.

sexual pleasures. Hannah enjoys the attention of men, perhaps because she feels that Eva is not as attentive to her needs. Hannah does not simply sleep with random men, but she chose men who are "husbands of her friends and neighbors…she ripple[s] with sex."[36] While Eva never gives a reason to categorize her as untrustworthy, Hannah does due to her own reckless behavior and lack of consideration or empathy for the married women in her community. Hannah's behavior mirrors that of her father, acting upon sexual impulse and the desire to rebel. Eva's sense of agency derives from her independence. She raises and cares for her children without the help of a man. However, Hannah's autonomy stems from her decision to have sexual relationships with various men. Both women "love maleness, for its own sake" due to the power associated with masculinity. However, they show their love for "maleness" differently—Eva through communicating with men and Hannah through sex.[37] African American women wanted to feel a sense of independence, to have control over some aspect of their lives. Morrison notes this and shows how such desperation has the ability to affect relationships and lead to unhealthy consequences. This will be especially relevant in my discussion of Hannah's daughter, Sula.

Hannah feels isolated within her family and community. She questions her own mother's love for her and even brings up the topic in conversation, longing for an answer to vanquish her worries. Hannah specifically asks Eva if she loved her and her siblings "when [they] was little," disregarding the fact that a mother's love extends beyond the childhood years.[38] Hannah is torn between wanting her mother's love and feeling like she

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[36] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 41. E-book.
[37] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 40. E-book.
[38] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 58. E-book.

does not deserve it. Eva is offended be her question, responding with an answer that lacks compassion: "No, I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'."[39] Eva loves her children but in her own reserved way. She is unable to articulate her feelings, hardened by a life of struggle. She focuses more heavily on survival than sentimentality. As the conversation continues and she becomes angry, signs of love still appear in her heated words: "Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't [loved you]."[40] A mother's love for her daughter is strung within a grotesque, metaphorical image of a decaying body. Eva argues that she shows love from the sustenance that she has provided her children. Her children's survival is due to her sacrifices. Eva stresses that they do not have the luxury of letting themselves become overwhelmed by love. Love is not defined by gifts and heart-to-heart talks. In Eva's world, if you are still breathing then that means someone loved you. Therefore, the oppression and hardships that the black community faces due to racism has the ability to affect family relationships. Although the novel does not heavily mention the white community, the reader knows oppression exists due to the segregated nature of these communities and the time period. This conversation for example takes place in 1922.

It is not long after the conversation that Eva loses Hannah. She burns to death just like Plum. However, unlike Plum's death, Eva was not responsible. It is not a coincidence that the image of fire is brought up again. Fire erases Eva's children from existence but leaves behind the smell of smoke and the memory of what was. Just as Eva "continued to call [Plum's name]" after conversing with Hannah about Plum's death, repeating his name in a state of shock even though months had passed, the image of Hannah burning is

[39] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 58. E-book.
[40] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 58. E-book.

left behind, an image Eva and even Sula must bare.[41] Eva looks out the window of her home and unexpectedly witnesses a gruesome scene: "…she [sees] Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire [are] licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance."[42] Morrison juxtaposes normalcy with horror, noting the burning woman along with something so simple and soft as a blue dress. Morrison also chooses to use the word "dance" to describe Hannah's frantic and violent jumps and movements. Dancing usually has a positive connotation since it is a form of artistic expression. However, Morrison twists the word and gives it a much darker meaning. Eva tries to save her daughter, hurting herself in the process. Neighbors witnessing the horror and her "dancing" also attempt to help, pouring water on Hannah and "cover[ing] her legs with a shirt."[43] Although this thesis will later dive into the harsh judgments and gossipy nature of the community, this moment shows the neighbors' wish to help. They act quickly, suggesting that they are used to such trauma in their lives and can only act accordingly, linking back to Morrison's comment about the culture in *Sula*: the community learns to accept evil since this is the only option they have. Morrison also presents the image of blood again except the blood does not reside in a glass bottle of water; this time, it "fills [Eva's] eyes so she [cannot] see…[she can] only smell the familiar odor of cooked flesh."[44] When Eva temporarily loses one of her senses, a loss that is disorienting and frightening, her sense of smell is amplified, introducing her to the traumatizing scent of a violent death. Again with the word "cooked," Morrison strips a word of its normalcy and implements it in a disturbing manner. This literary technique meshes everyday activities with the horrors of

[41] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 61. E-book.
[42] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 64. E-book.
[43] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 65. E-book.
[44] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 65. E-book.

the black community, emphasizing that these horrors are indeed their reality and their "normal."

Sula witnesses the burning of her mother but does not jump to action. She watches silently, observing rather than reacting. At a glance, one might simply believe that the twelve-year-old was in a state of shock, unable to move or look away from the grotesque scene of her mother's death. In fact, the community whispers amongst themselves this very sentiment. However, Eva has another theory, for she "remain[s] convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested."[45] Children are naturally curious but one must ask: Is her "interest" innocent or is there a darker element to Sula's character?

The moment indeed goes beyond childhood curiosity and is based on two elements: previous realizations of her oppressive state due to her race and sex as well as a traumatizing experience she endured rather recently. In regards to the first reason, Morrison writes that Sula and her best friend Nel are aware of the limited power they hold as African American girls. Sula and Nel in fact initially connected and became friends due to this mutual understanding, this unspoken but very apparent aspect condition in their lives. They knew that "they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them…[therefore,] they had set about creating something else to be."[46] Literary scholar Doreatha Drummond Mbalia directly references this quote and explains that "Within this statement are found both the dilemma of the novel and the solution to the dilemma: African women are oppressed, and to escape their

[45] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 66. E-book.
[46] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 47-48. E-book.

oppression, they must become self-propagators."[47] Hannah burning is a physical representation of said oppression and Sula expects to witness such horrors. Sula and Nel both attempt to find meaning and instill a sense of agency in their lives in order to combat oppression. However, their choices in life greatly differ, leading to their eventual separation. Before diving into their adult years, it is important to first note the traumatic event they experienced together during their childhood.

Chicken Little, a neighborhood boy, climbs a tree with Sula as Nel watches below. The moment is a peaceful one for Chicken Little, for he enjoys the view and is proud of himself for climbing the intimidating height. He is presented as an innocent soul, one who does not tease like Nel. Morrison includes the usual childish behavior of nose-picking and uncontrollable laughter. However, once on the ground, back on the foundation that is reality, Chicken Little meets his death. A female Peace once again causes the death of another, but like Plum's death, there is a warmth and joy associated with their last moment. Morrison intertwines the sorrow of death, especially that of a child, with feelings of comfort. Sula and Chicken Little are swinging around with their hands intertwined when Sula accidently lets go and Chicken Little flies into the water, leading to his eventual drowning. Morrison juxtaposes laughter with both literal, in terms of physical landscape, and metaphorical darkness: "When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank…Both girls stared at the water."[48] The final moment Sula and Nel experience with Chicken Little is one of

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[47] Mbalia, Doreatha Drummond, *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*. Salem, MA: Associated University Press, Inc., 1991. 43. E-book.
[48] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 53. E-book.

happiness since they cannot see beyond the darkness of the water. They cannot see if he struggles to swim or if he hits his head and is knocked unconscious. The girls do not witness the struggle, only his joy. However, their joy evaporates. Morrison also introduces the image of water, an image that acts as a contradictory symbol to fire. The young girls stare at the water, at the scene of the "crime," while Eva does not stare into the flames that engulf her son. Instead, she walks away, unable to bear the image. She is also physically unable to stare too long at Hannah's death since her eyes fill with blood due to her injuries. Sula's shock and quiet observation as she stares into the dark water relates to her silent observation as she watches her mother's death. She stares at the scene, feeling powerless. Yes, curiosity plays a role, for it is only natural, but Sula's silent observation is not because of a darkness *in* her but a darkness that *surrounds* her due to the horrors that she has witnessed and the guilt she feels at such a young age.

The community views Sula as a controversial figure in her adult years, rejecting "black cultural identity."[49] She is the center of the their gossip and unintentionally unifies the community through their mutual hatred of her. Even her physical appearance disturbs the community, for she has a birthmark on her face that is deemed ugly. However, it is hypocritical of the community to judge her on such a physical basis given that the African American community is judged based on the color of their skin—a physical trait. The community unknowingly practices the same type of oppression forced upon them. Perhaps because they are beaten down they cannot help but target an individual in their

[49] Peach, Linden, *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 51. Print.

own community, someone whom they deem inadequate and foul, comparing her to a "roach."[50]

The criticisms directed towards her stem from two categories: family dynamics and sexual rebellion. The African American woman was expected to fulfill responsibilities pertaining to the family as well as only partake in "appropriate" forms of sexual expression, meaning with one's husband or an unmarried man. It was an unspoken rule that all such sexual partners must be African American. In regards to family dynamics, Morrison highlights the inevitable of growing old and how time can cause a shift in household power. Sula becomes the "guardian" while Eva becomes the frail woman whom is sent away to live in a home for the elderly. Morrison writes of how Eva "didn't even have time to comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas."[51] Morrison includes this simple detail to emphasize Eva's helplessness and lack of control. She has lost her children, her home, and even her freedom to carry out such mundane tasks as combing her hair. Hair also carries a connotation of femininity, sexuality, and beauty—a classic symbol evident in the poetry of Robert Browning and Edmund Spenser. However, the symbol is classically used in relation to blond women with golden curls. Eva's hair distorts the classical stereotype of a woman's hair and replaces it with a modern take. The struggle and oppression Eva faced in life caused her to never truly feel beautiful or sexually satisfied. Her own pleasures came second to the upkeep of her home and the survival of her children. Although Hannah and Sula's sexual allure is emphasized and their sexualities explored, Eva lacks such an option. Therefore, the moment described holds a deeper meaning then simply running out of time to perform mundane tasks. This

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[50] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 89. E-book.
[51] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 77. E-book.

moment emphasizes Eva's loss of femininity and a sexual identity. Sula's decision to put Eva in a home insults the "values and beliefs" of the African American community."[52] In response, the community views Sula as a failure to her family and a rebel who refuses to conform to society's expectations of women.

Morrison writes of how black men "insisted that all unions between white men and black women [must] be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did."[53] Consensual sex between the two races would mean that black women are simply handing over yet another power to the oppressor: the power of sexual domination over minority women. To surrender such power is considered an act of betrayal. The accusations of this nature that are directed towards Sula stem from the mouths of men, emphasizing the division within the community between the sexes. Whether or not the accusations are true is considered irrelevant in the eyes of the community, for if a man states something is true than it automatically must be viewed as such. After the gossip spread, "all minds were closed to her…it made old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her…"[54] While African American men hold little power in the country as a whole due to white supremacy, they exercise significant power in their own community, influencing the women to believe exactly what they wish for them to believe. The women follow suit, leaving behind their ability to think for themselves and make come to their own conclusions. Morrison therefore emphasizes the patriarchal

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[52] Samuels, Wilfred D., and Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Toni Morrison*. Boston: Twayne, 1990. 35. Print.
[53] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 89. E-book.
[54] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 89. E-book.

norms of society once again, showing the power "food chain" as men, women and finally children. Morrison also notes that the women react in a social manner, their facial expressions expressing their disdain. The men however have violent thoughts that one can suggest have sexual undertones, for they wish to be the ones who sexually dominate the women in their communities instead of the white man. Sula is therefore "labeled a 'bitch' because her promiscuity threatens the men's prowess and authority."[55]

The final example of sexual rebellion attached to Sula involves Nel, for Sula has sexual relations with Nel's husband, Jude. This is not only a violation of sexual etiquette, but also a violation of trust between women. Sula's behavior is due to her lack of adequate female role models as a child. Her grandmother and mother never introduced her to an "intimate knowledge of marriage" since both women lacked stable and healthy marriages of their own.[56] The only healthy relationship Sula has experienced with a woman is her friendship with Nel, yet she is unable to understand the wrong she has committed as well as the consequences of sex. Sula views sex like breathing and walking. She recognizes that human sexuality is natural yet she does not consider the social aspect of sex. She acknowledges that she is seen as a rebel in the community for various reasons, but she fails to understand exactly *why*. Nel, who believes she is in a happy marriage and following the guidelines of the community, experiences heartbreak due to Sula's carelessness. Nel witnesses her husband and Sula together and describes the moment as animalistic in nature, for they are "on all fours naked…on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs. Nibbling at each other…"[57] Morrison includes animalistic

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[55] Peach, Linden, *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 53. Print.
[56] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 93. E-book.
[57] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 84. E-book.

diction to address Sula's own way of thinking. Sula follows her mother's actions, expressing herself through her body rather than words, acting on impulses instead of fighting such spontaneity. The parenthetical inclusion also emphasizes a great difference between Sula and Nel: Sula does not practice internal dialogue, rejecting all self-awareness, while Nel's thoughts are racing, as she must face the truth presented to her.

Sula betrays the one person who has shown her unconditional love. Sula uses sex as a means of rebelling against the community that isolates her. Morrison writes of how Sula found pleasure in sex, not because of physical gratification or the feeling of becoming close to another, but because sex brought about "misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow...she liked to think of it as wicked."[58] Sula's continued rebellious behavior is in reaction to the constant judgment and disapproval directed towards her from the community. It is essentially a circle that cannot stop spiraling out of control, for each party acts and then reacts. Sula plays the part of the sinful and cruel woman because that is how she has been labeled and she cannot escape the title. In fact, she begins to enjoy the feeling of misery because it is better than feeling nothing at all. Numbness and the inability to feel human emotion is greater torture for her than pain, for at least pain makes her feel human. Sula believes that any attention is better than being completely invisible. Meanwhile Frank, the character I will be focusing on in *Home*, disagrees with this way of thinking and equates numbness with survival. Sula acts irresponsibly and destroys her friendship with Nel, but the reasoning behind her actions is deeply rooted and complex. She acts wickedly, not to simply *be* wicked but to *be* someone. She does not know how to be pleasant and happy given her past, the women in her family, and the community's

[58] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 95. E-book.

outrage towards her. Therefore, she acts wickedly and attempts to embrace such wickedness. However, she fails because she does not take into account the power of betrayal and the inevitability of change. She loses Nel and therefore any trace of stability in her short life.

Sula's sexual relationship with Ajax also shows Sula's desperation to use sex as a means of feeling something and therefore, as a means of obtaining some sense of stability and power in her life. Sula has sex with Ajax in Eva's bed which is yet another representation of Sula's supposed power. Morrison writes of how Ajax "liked for her to mount him so he could see her towering above him and call sweet obscenities up into her fair…she rocked there, swayed there, like a Georgia pine on its knees…"[59] Morrison begins the passage with "towering," a word that evokes a position of power and authority, but then quickly shows that Sula lacks such control. First, Morrison includes the oxymoron of "sweet obscenities," suggesting that the most romantic and comforting thing Sula knows stem from words that hold vulgar meanings. Morrison also compares the image of Sula moving her body during sex to that of a tree, first "rocking" but then "swaying," emphasizing an important distinction between rocking with authority and uncontrollably swaying due to the wind or in this case, due to Sula's lack of guidance. This is not to suggest that Sula should not be held accountable for her actions, such as betraying Nel, but Morrison purposely includes these differing words to hint at the complexity of Sula's character, her manner of thinking, and her troubling situation. The moment of physical intimacy described is intense and physically satisfying for both Sula and Ajax. However, Morrison ends the scene on a somber note: "He swallowed her

[59] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 101. E-book.

mouth just as her thighs had swallowed his genitals, and the house was very, very quiet."[60] The description of swallowing one another sounds more aggressive than gentle. The house is then filled with silence and a feeling of emptiness, for Sula and Ajax's physical intimacy does not equate to love. In fact, the next sentence of the novel describes how "Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it."[61] Sula does not experience romantic love that is based off of mutual respect and trust. Instead, Sula explores the dangers of possession or perhaps more accurately stated, the dangers of *desiring* the power associated with possession.

Nel visits Sula on her deathbed but the conversation between the two women proves that Sula's manner of thinking has not changed. She believes her way of living is superior to everyone else's, including Nel's, claiming that she can "do it all" and "have it all."[62] She argues that her existence as a woman is no different than if she were a man, ignoring the overwhelming societal conventions of the 1930s. Sula's convictions may be ahead of her time with thoughts of gender equality, but her motivations are not to better society. Instead, Sula focuses on her own pleasures. She admits that she is lonely but at least her loneliness is of her own making rather than being forced upon her by another. What Sula fails to recognize is that "loneliness" can never garner a positive connotation. "Loneliness" hints at a desire to have a companion and to feel accepted by either an individual or a group. It is one thing to be independent or to take great pleasure in being alone, but to be "lonely" means that the person is not satisfied with their current isolation.

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[60] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 101. E-book.
[61] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 101. E-book.
[62] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 108. E-book.

Sula does not apologize to Nel or understand her pain. Instead, she simply states how "being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it."[63] Sula thinks of Nel in her final moments and dies painlessly. Sula acknowledges the friendship she had with Nel but never truly welcomes the power of female friendship because she was too obsessed with the allure of the power of sex, the power of rebellion, and the power of possession. Sula believed that the only correct way for the African American woman to have control in her life during the oppressive 1920s and 1930s was to only depend on the self and to never confide in others, resulting in a tragic existence.

[63] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 110. E-book.

Chapter 3

Identifying the African American Male in *Home*

While *Sula* greatly emphasizes the African American woman, *Home* follows the life of Frank Money, a Korean War veteran who must survive on the battlefield that is America. The 1950s is commonly viewed as a happy time in the United States, glamorized as one of peaceful harmony. Morrison shines a light on the truth through the genre of literary fiction even though Morrison herself acknowledges that the decade has "acquired a gloss of voluntary orderliness, of ethnic harmony." Morrison continues, stating that the 1950s "was a decade of outrageous political and ethnic persecution."[64] The novel is constructed differently than *Sula*, divided between first and third person. Frank speaks to the reader but suppresses something, hiding behind the shadows of his memories from the war instead of facing them head on. His trauma is greatly apparent yet it is considered shameful for a man to show fear, sorrow, and uncertainty. Frank also cannot escape from the burden of his race, the physical characteristic that depicts him as an outsider, an "other," in society.

Morrison begins *Home* with the following poem:

Whose house is this?

Whose night keeps out the light

In here?

Say, who owns this house?

It's not mine

I dreamed another, sweeter, brighter

[64] Baillie, Justine. *Toni Morrison and Literary Tradition: The Invention of an Aesthetic*. Bloomsbury Academic, London. 197-198.

With a view of lakes crossed in painted boats;

Of fields wide as arms open for me.

This house is strange.

Its shadows lie.

Say, tell me, why does its lock fit my key?[65]

A common theme between *Sula* and *Home* is the desire for stability and a safe home, whether in relation to a physical house or healthy family and community relations. However, the concept of "home" to the African American community is just that—a concept. Even when living among each other, surrounded by people who feel the same anger and sadness, there is still a clear sense of loneliness and isolation that pervades. Gaston Bachelard writes about the function of a house in *The Poetics of Space: The Classical Look At How We Experience Intimate Places*: "The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."[66] However, this statement is not accurate and does not apply to either of Morrison's books, for a physical roof over one's head never evokes a sense of peace or safety.

Literary scholar Roynon argues "novels set in the decades preceding the Civil Rights Movement have in common the African search for belonging, for 'home'…"[67] The untitled poem involves two elements: memory loss and a darkened reality. Memory loss in the novel is due to severe trauma/shellshock. The title of the book expresses the

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[65] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 1. Print.
[66] Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space: The Classical Look At How We Experience Intimate Places*. Beacon Press, 1994 ed. 6. Print.
[67] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 102. Print.

need to remember where one came from as well as the desire to move forward and find comfort in times of pain. I will explain in this chapter how Frank's "home" is found through his connection with his sister, Cee. While *Sula* focuses on female relations and the division between the genders, *Home* ends with the union of brother and sister, of man and woman.

The poem includes several question marks, emphasizing the uncertainties that pervade the African American existence during the 1950s. Morrison contrasts "night" and "light," using rhyme to show difference rather than similarity. A desire to see the light, to feel happiness and acceptance is overpowered by the darkened shadow of racism and oppression. The speaker calls out to no one, isolated in his thoughts, his cries unheard. Morrison also distinguishes between "who" and "I," creating a deep sense of isolation. The speaker feels as though he only possesses dreams and nothing tangible. The speaker's dreams comfort him but the physical reality he looks upon, the house before him, is "strange." The last line of the poem reveals that the house is indeed his, not simply through the key, but through the undeniable fact that he can relate to the darkness that surrounds the house. The poem acts as an introduction to Frank's trauma and his inability to face his demons until the end of the book. Morrison explores the physical war and the mental war, the external war and the internal war. The poem ends with the key fitting the lock but does not include the action of opening the door, showing the reader that the journey will be long and painful before Frank feels an ounce of peace.

The opening chapter of the book is a first-person account from Frank. He recalls a disturbing childhood memory of himself and his sister Cee; the two witnessed white men dragging and burying a black man who is near death. Frank notices the black man's

quivering foot that shook "as though with a little effort it could break through the dirt being shoveled in."[68] This quivering foot symbolizes the African American community attempting to hold onto life in the face of poverty while the white community buries them deeper into oppression. Although the races of the men burying the black victim are not described in this chapter, details of the event are expressed later on and the reader learns that the white men forced a black boy to kill his own father. The father encourages his son to do as he is told so that his son can live. He sacrifices himself and shows his love for his son despite the screaming men around him who want their entertainment and embrace their disturbing belief in white supremacy. In this moment, Morrison identifies the African American parent as an individual who must make difficult decisions and sacrifices. This father can be compared to Eva in some regard, for they both love their children but must witness their suffering, whether it is Eva witnessing Plum's illness and Hannah's death or the father seeing his son's torturous state before the son kills the person he loves most. Morrison argues that parenthood can affect both genders similarly and that parental identity goes beyond gender identity at times despite the distinguished roles in society.

The beginning prose of both *Sula* and *Home* begin with the setting, emphasizing the surrounding area and the violence that exists in people's own backyards. Morrison points out the outer world so that readers will be able to analyze the characters' thoughts and inner struggles. In this particular section, the horses nearby are compared to men and said to be both "beautiful" and "brutal."[69] Frank notes that he remembers the horses more than the actual burial, most likely because he has blocked out the traumatic scene.

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[68] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 4. Print.
[69] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 5. Print.

Literary scholar Roynon notes that "forgetfulness, or trying to forget" is a common theme in *Home*.[70] Denial is more comforting than dissecting the details of one's past. Frank only briefly describes the scene and how he and Cee "could not see the faces of the men doing the burying, only their trousers; but [they] saw the edge of a spade drive the jerking foot down to join the rest of itself. When [Cee] saw the black foot with its creamy pink and mud-streaked sole being whacked into the grave, her whole body began to shake."[71] Morrison contrasts the simplicity of something like trousers to the horrors of racial violence. This is a common literary tool of Morrison's since this was also evident in *Sula* when Hannah caught fire in her blue, cotton dress. Morrison juxtaposes common items like clothes to the all too common violence and sorrows the African American community faces in these various time periods. Frank feels obligated as a male to comfort his sister, thinking that he "could handle it" because of his gender. However, *Home* argues that men have the right to be just as vulnerable as women and can most certainly experience trauma despite unrealistic societal conventions. Morrison also includes violent diction in the passage with "jerking" and "whacked" as well as the image of a spade—the murderer's tool to cover up the evidence of his sin. Man's desire to hurt and kill others is fueled by racism, jealousy, insanity or hatred. Animals usually kill as a means of survival, particularly so that they can eat. Man *chooses* to act cruelly and inflict pain on others. Animals, such as the horses standing by, lack the capacity to make such choices. Therefore, Morrison argues that man can go beyond the capabilities of an animal—that he can be far worse.

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[70] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 123. Print.
[71] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 4. Print.

The second chapter explores emotional numbness and the desire to eradicate unwanted memories. Frank's determination to avoid confronting the trauma he experienced in war relates to the male expectation in society to stay strong and stop oneself from becoming too emotional or vulnerable. Before Frank can escape the confines of the psychiatric hospital, he must master a lifeless state of being: "Breathing. How to do it so no one would know he was awake…The trick of imitating semi-coma, like playing dead facedown in a muddy battlefield, was to concentrate on a single neutral object. Something that would smother any hint of life."[72] Morrison begins the chapter with "breathing," the obvious sign of life. However, she cleverly contrasts breathing/life with "playing dead" and attempting to look and feel as lifeless as possible in order to both escape the ward (the physical prison) and his internal demons (the mental strains). The most intriguing word in this passage is "neutral" since it is a word that evokes a calmness that does not exist in Frank's life. Frank also focused on the neutral horses as a child instead of focusing on the man being buried. The horses are a distraction, an animal that lacks the ability to be cruel. Frank focuses on neutrality as a coping mechanism—a means of survival. In fact, throughout the chapter he is referred to as "the patient" instead of Frank. The narrator depersonalizes Frank as a means of mirroring Frank's focus on neutrality and his own numbness. In his eyes, anything personal equates to weakness.

A woman defending a man is also deemed as weak and unnatural in the novel, further emphasizing the importance of patriarchy in both the white and black communities. Morrison writes of a moment of violent racism involving an African American man who is attacked at a train station. We can contrast this moment to the

[72] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 7. Print.

musings of Sula who oddly explains the African American male identity as one met with love and respect due to the amount of attention black men receive from men and women of both races: "…I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed…Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you…"[73] Sula's sentiments are misguided. Although one may read her words as a disturbing way of telling a joke, I argue that part of Sula believes that love equates to attention. She also believes that any attention directed towards genitalia and sex is positive and can somehow be linked to sexual rebellion when in reality, the African American male is wrongfully targeted. She does not consider the serious ramifications and inevitable emotional strife of such controversial attention. The man attacked at the train station experiences physical pain, anger, sadness, and embarrassment, none of which equate to a feeling of acceptance and love from white man's society. His wife defends him but is also physically hurt. The incident is not reported to the conductor due the belief that the victims are inferior members of society. However, this moment is not only an instance of public violence but it is also an example of how such violence affects personal relationships.

The husband sits with his wife in a state of anger, ashamed that a woman would come to his aid. His wife ignored the established gender roles out of love for her husband

[73] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 82. E-book.

but is met with his "seething" expression, "his face a skull of shame…"[74] Morrison's harsh and frightening language stresses patriarchal beliefs as well as male frustrations. The husband feels inadequate on multiple levels: as a husband, as a black man, and as a man in general. He feels as though he has failed his wife because she is also hurt in the fight. He feels angry that the simple fact of his darker pigment can bring about violence that he has no control over. And finally, he feels ashamed that he could not win the fight and defend himself as well as wife. This "failure" that begins in the public sphere affects the personal relationship that is marriage. Frank believes that the man will whip his wife for her wrongdoing but later tells the narrator to take back his word, as if the narrator got it all wrong: "I didn't think any such thing. What I thought was that he was proud of her but didn't want to show how proud he was to the other men on the train. I don't think you know much about love. Or me."[75] Frank either lies about his opinion or changes it but either way, it is clear that his thoughts are disheveled and contrasting. It is valid to argue that Frank very well believes the husband will not beat his wife and that he will feel comfortable forgiving his wife in the privacy of their home. However, this does not mean that Frank can let go of his own belief that a man must always embody strength and other traditional aspects of masculinity. Frank's tactic of avoiding signs of weakness is to numb himself, whether with alcohol or focusing on neutral images that eradicate any mental stimulants. Lifelessness is more acceptable than an overly emotional or vulnerable man. The importance of males embodying society's interpretation of masculinity is so greatly

[74] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 24. Print.
[75] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 69. Print.

emphasized that when Frank asks a young boy named Thomas what he wants to be when a grows up, he answers with two words: "a man."[76]

It is important to briefly mention Thomas since he plays a major role in the book when cultivating the image of "masculinity" despite his very brief appearance on the page. The character embodies two aspects of this thesis: the role of racial violence in these communities and the African American male identity. Thomas was shot by a police officer and left permanently handicapped. Thomas' father tells the story of what happened to Thomas, how "some redneck rookie thought his dick was underappreciated by his brother cops."[77] Notice that the importance of masculinity is emphasized in the white community as well through the male genital reference. A man must prove that he is tough, intimidating, and unafraid to pull the trigger, even if that trigger is aimed at an innocent, 8-year-old boy. Thomas' bad arm makes it nearly impossible for him to play sports and therefore affects Thomas' ability to be physically active and fit, a traditional aspect of masculinity. Thomas says he wishes to be a man one day, hinting that he hopes to still be able to fulfill his role as a man in society despite his physical condition. He wishes to impress the male and female community members through his intellect and mental strength rather than through any physical competitiveness.

Even during Frank's conversation with Thomas' father about Thomas' injury, Frank's mind darts back to times of war. Thomas' father speaks of the role Jesus played in Thomas' life and the reference to Jesus triggers unwanted memories: "Bible stuff works every time every place—except the fire zone. 'Jesus. Jesus!' That's what Mike

[76] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 33. Print.
[77] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 31. Print.

said."[78] These memories rush back to Frank in an uncontrollable and rapid fashion. Morrison presents them without warning, emphasizing how flashbacks and the associated affects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) work and how they in turn affect Frank's notion of masculinity. Frank desires to push the trauma from war in the furthest corner of his mind. He desperately attempts to focus on images that are not attached to any emotion since usually "everything remind[s] him of something loaded with pain." Instead he "concentrate[s] on something else—a night sky, starless, or better, train tracks. No scenery, no trains, just endless, endless tracks."[79] The tracks relate to escapism and the desire to run from disturbing memories. They lack distinct scenery and such details like grass, gravel, or any life forms. Instead, the tracks are enveloped in darkness. Literary scholar Roynon comments on this particular passage as well and how the train tracks "anticipate Frank's imminent reverse migration from Seattle back South to rescue his dying sister…The 'tracks' on which Frank meditates suggest both freedom and confinement, both escape and being pursued."[80] This analysis once again connects to the reality of the African American existence during the time periods of Morrison's novels. No Witch Hunts can save Frank from the realities of oppression. Eventually, Frank must face the existence of his pain that greatly affects the manner in which he views himself and the way he interacts with others, for example, Lily.

Lily is yet another memory Frank wishes to push away. To think of Lily is to think of loss and what could have been if he were not so distraught and traumatized from war and his childhood. He remembers Lily "shut[ting] the door behind him" and how

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[78] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 31. Print.
[79] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 8. Print.
[80] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 117-118. Print.

quickly after his "anxiety became unmanageable."[81] We know early on in the novel that Frank's romantic relationship with Lily did not end out of a lack of love on Frank's part, but due to his anxiety and mental illness. Frank now focuses on neutral objects and images because the image of Lily represents passion and emotions. Frank once clung to Lily and romance as a means of stability since "only with Lily did the pictures fade, move behind a screen in his brain, pale but waiting, waiting and accusing."[82] Frank's medicine and distraction was not a lifeless image but a mesmerizing woman. The memory of war always lingered like a virus embedded in one's spine, yet Lily temporarily kept the sickness at bay. Morrison describes Frank's thoughts as "pictures" that most likely hold vivid details. The repetition of "waiting" constructs an image of these memories as monsters lingering in the shadows "behind the screen." Frank's memories highlight the senses, most often sight and sound. The third person narrator introduces these memories slowly, like damaged photographs that only include small snippets of the full picture. The reader cannot come to a full realization until Frank does so himself. Before we learn the full magnitude of the horrors of war and the specific events of Frank's experience, we learn of the consequences of such trauma—the aftermath.

Morrison writes of the financial burdens the couple struggled with, such as Lily's low-paying job as a seamstress. However, their relationship was affected by multiple outside influences that went beyond money, most notably Frank's PTSD. Lily "had begun to feel annoyance rather than alarm when she came home from work and saw

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[81] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 15. Print.
[82] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 21. Print.

[Frank] sitting on the sofa staring at the floor. One sock on, the other in his hand."[83] The war created a deeper layer of "otherness" in Frank's life. Isolation stems from both his race and the trauma of war, in both public settings and in the privacy of his home. His trauma alters and affects the healthy relationship they once had, causing a rift due to Lily's inability to understand Frank's thoughts and reactions.

The exploration of PTSD and the affect it has on intimate relationships is not new for Morrison. Morison's master's thesis at Cornell University entitled "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated" discusses similar themes of "otherness" due to outside forces. Morrison writes about Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, particularly focusing on the character of Septimus. Septimus experiences PTSD after fighting in World War I and witnessing horrible violence and the death of a presumed male lover. His mental instability leads to a lack of understanding from his peers and even his wife, Rezia. In my reading of *Mrs. Dalloway*, I argue that Rezia always loved her husband, just like Lily, but found her own mental stability ruptured by her husband's odd behavior. Although mental illness is unfortunately still stigmatized to this day, it was even more controversial and unexplainable in the early 20th century, resulting in feelings of frustration and resentment. The traditional reaction to mental illness in early 20th century England was to completely isolate a person from society, relocating them out of cities and to the countryside. The relocation was more to benefit the community rather than the actual patient. To push away a problem was considered synonymous to finding a solution. Before Septimus resorts to his own tragic method of escapism, suicide, Woolf writes of his numbness and inability to function and relate to others: "He looked at people

[83] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 75. Print.

outside; happy they seemed, collecting in the middle of the street, shouting, laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel…it must be the fault of the world then—that he could not feel."[84] While Septimus thinks of his struggle to relate to others, drowning in feelings of "otherness," his wife thinks about everything England has to offer. Even when his wife shows emotion, Septimus fails to be a comforting presence for her. Woolf describes Septimus as distant and depressed, using repetition in this particular passage as a means of emphasizing Septimus' spiraling condition and ever-present numbness. Woolf also includes action verbs and contrasts them to Septimus' silence and stillness, as if dead already. Frank also sits in silence, frozen in a state of mental trauma with "a quiet, faraway look," unable to find warmth and support in a romantic relationship.[85] Both Septimus and Frank find communication and simple, everyday tasks daunting. Morrison and Woolf recognize that such ruptured relationships are neither party's fault, but the fault of unfortunate circumstances and strict societal expectations/prejudices. At one point in the novel, Septimus screams about the disgusting reality of "human cruelty—how they tear each other to pieces. The fallen, he said, they tear to pieces."[86] This sentiment also relates to 1950s America, for the African American community can be viewed as "the fallen" due to the constant violence, public ridicule and feelings of "otherness" they experience by the hands of their oppressors.

Not only can Frank be compared to Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*, but he can also be compared to two male characters in *Sula*: Plum, whom we have already explored, and Shadrock. Shadrock fought in World War I and was known in town as the mentally

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[84] Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925. 87-88. Print.
[85] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 74. Print.
[86] Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925. 140. Print.

disturbed loner. Morrison describes Shadrock's emptiness through repeating the definitive word of "no": "…he didn't even know who or what he was…with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do…"[87] Shadrock lacks a sense of identity in the novel due to the trauma of war as well as the clear absence of companionship and support in his life. The passage begins with describing the end result, the absence of defining and knowing the self. She then continues by listing what brought about this feeling of emptiness and inadequacy. Morrison first notes that Shadrock does not belong to any group and then continues with much more detailed and specific losses, such as a "comb" and "soap" (the feeling of being well-kept and clean), a "pencil" and "faded postcard" (the excitement associated with experiencing things and writing them down), and a "bed" (the relaxing feeling of being well-rested, comfortable, and even intimate with another person). Frank experiences similar feelings of depression and hopelessness, unable to connect with others because of two reasons: people struggle to understand his troubles and he struggles to even understand himself.

Morrison writes of snippets and brief moments that lead to Frank feeling trapped in his own thoughts and overwhelmingly alone. Lily views the deterioration of their relationship as "more of a stutter than a single eruption."[88]The outside world and struggles of the black male soldier can be seen by others, such as Lily, but never fully grasped. During a dinner party, Frank is fine one minute and then bolts the next, pushing past people to escape the confinement, physically reacting and running in an attempt to

[87] Morrison, Toni, *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. 20. E-book.
[88] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 75. Print.

drive out disturbing memories. When Lily confronts Frank about his odd behavior, the conversation is awkward and forced. Lily refers to his service in the Korean War as "time in Korea," as if Frank was merely passing through the area, a phrase Frank finds just as odd as Lily finds his actions.[89] The reader eventually discovers the true horror Frank participated in that has haunted him throughout the novel. It is important to analyze this moment before discussing the significance of the other place that haunts Frank: Lotus, Georgia.

Frank lies to the narrator and therefore the reader about the details surrounding Frank's trauma in Korea. The presence of a little girl in Korea is repeated throughout the book. However, Frank first claims that another shot her dead. The truth though is that Frank killed the little girl. He admits that he lied to not only the narrator but to himself, pushing the true scene of that day in the furthest corner of his mind, unable to accept that he has something in common with the police officer who shot Thomas. Both were grown men and both targeted a child. However, Frank's reasoning differs greatly from the police officer's motive. The police officer acted out of hatred towards the African American race and felt a desperate need to prove his masculinity and power. Frank shoots and kills the girl because he is disgusted with the fact that a child sexually arouses him, making him question what it means to be a man. The little girl died with an orange in her hand since she was hungry and hoped to find some sort of sustenance in the rotting fruit. The fruit itself represents war and how those in it are both alive and dead, breathing but barely physically and mentally surviving in the harsh battle conditions. Death wins in the case of the little girl and Frank's guilt finally begins to boil over: "What type of man is that? And

[89] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 77. Print.

what type of man thinks he can ever in life pay the price of that orange?"[90] In the novel thus far, men have felt obligated to prove their physical strength as well as their ability to fulfill the role of a lover. However, these aspects of the male psyche are tainted due to the age of the female victim and the unnecessary violence.

Frank faces his sins only after witnessing his younger sister's own trauma at the hands of a man in power. Cee faces a similar challenge in attempting to define her own gender identity after losing her ability to become pregnant. Dr. Beau, the white man Cee worked for, robbed Cee of her full potential in life after doing harmful and permanently scarring experiments, just as Frank robbed the little girl he killed. The doctor experimented on her genital and reproductive area, a common practice towards African American women, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Historian Siobhan Somerville writes about one of many common misconceptions when discussing the black female body. Doctors believed that black women had "unusually large clitoris," a theory that was printed in trusted medical journals until 1921.[91] Experiments such as these were used to further the white supremacy agenda. Whether or not certain distinctions between races were factual was irrelevant—the only goal was "proving" the superiority of the white race. Somerville further explores this point, citing the "Cult of True Womanhood," a title that promoted "white women's sexual 'purity' while implicitly [suggesting] African-American women's sexual accessibility."[92] This same idea is also evident in "The Servant" (1890), a painting by Franz von Bayros. Historian Sander L. Gilman

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[90] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 134. Print.
[91] Somerville, Siobhan. "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.2 (2012): 253. *JSTOR*. Web.
[92] Somerville, Siobhan. "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.2 (2012): 254. *JSTOR*. Web.

discusses how the painting contrasts society's insistence of the white female's purity and the black female's sexual deviance due to genital abnormalities. Gilman notes how social beliefs affected scientific experiments: "The relationship between the sexuality of the black woman and that of the sexualized white woman enters a new dimension when contemporary scientific discourse concerning the nature of black female sexuality is examined."[93] Some doctors and scientists therefore believed that experimenting on an African American woman was justified.

Dr. Beau's experiments on Cee were fueled by both a scientific curiosity and a lust of power over women. Dr. Beau viewed his experiments and procedures on women as his own way of defining and embracing his masculinity. He would "occasionally perform abortions on society ladies" but he also "got so interested in wombs in general, constructing instruments to see farther and farther into them," with Cee being his latest victim.[94] It is assumed that the abortions he performed on white women were carried out in the most comfortable manner possible due to the factor of their race and class. However, Cee was seen as more of a lab rat than a human being. Dr. Beau focused on a single part of the body instead of the soul that harbors that body, falling "farther and farther" into the allure of his research and the power he felt from his control over Cee. The womb is the most literal and powerful symbol of life and it is destroyed, leaving Cee devastated.

Cee can never fulfill her wish to become a mother, a personal dream of hers as well as a societal expectation. When the women in Lotus find out Cee was working for a

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[93] Gilman, Sander L. "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." *Race, Writing and Difference*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1985. 231. Web.
[94] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 112-113. Print.

doctor, they immediately judge Cee; "…the eye rolling and tooth sucking was enough to make clear their scorn."[95] However, these women also nurse Cee and tell her that she is "good enough for Jesus."[96] Therefore, a close-knit community is still evident despite the judgments that also exist. The women feel no comfort in Cee's suffering. Cee embraces her pain and does not view her disappointment and angry tears as weakness, but as a human reaction to a great loss: "I'm not going to hide from what's true just because it hurts."[97] It takes Frank witnessing his sister's sorrow and refusal to ignore her natural emotional response for him to acknowledge his own wrongdoings in life. The societal expectation is for a man to shut down any emotional response and to embody every aspect of the definition of strength. Frank finally pushes back though and allows himself to be vulnerable. Frank rescues his sister from her violent employer and fulfills his brotherly duties, bringing her back to where it all started: Lotus, Georgia.

The name "Lotus" carries significant meaning to the title of the novel and the search for one's identity and "home." Lotus-eaters date back to Homer's *The Odyssey*. Literary scholar Roynon discusses how when eaten, the lotus fruit distracts an individual from pressing matters and reality, stopping the person from ever leaving and being reunited with loved ones. The lotus represents a standstill—a frozen moment in time. Roynon connects Homer's work with Morrison's through the common theme of "the elusive nature of 'home.'"[98] In an interview, Morrison herself comments on the significance of Lotus in *Home*: "Lotus becomes not a place in which to forget about the

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[95] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 122. Print.
[96] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 122. Print.
[97] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 131. Print.
[98] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 123. Print.

voyage home, but a final healing, a redemptive destination in its own right."[99] Lotus is not merely a physical location in the book but a representation of the lack of stability and the long journey Frank goes on throughout the novel's entirety. Frank must face his demons and contemplate his own identity in order to find meaning in his journey as a black man. Frank must snap himself out of his hunger for the lotus flowers, his hunger to drive away the past and embrace his numbness that drains him of any comfort or stability he may feel from those who care for him. Frank recognizes that the presence of women, both romantically (Lily) and in regards to family (Cee) push him, challenge him and as a result, make him feel as less of an outsider. Women inspire Frank to feel something and to accept the sorrows of life, no matter how unfair or terrible they may be. Morrison leaves the reader with the notion that the African American male must embrace both his strength and his weaknesses and must accept that everyone, regardless of gender or race, is vulnerable.

The novel ends with Frank and Cee giving a proper burial for the African American father whose murder they witnessed years ago during their childhood. Literary scholar Roynon discusses this final moment and the theme of "improper and proper treatment of the dead."[100] She compares the burial scene to Hector's burial in Homer's *Iliad*. Both scenes include bones being wrapped in cloth. A gentle tone and a feeling of respect are evident in both writings. Roynon notes that "Morrison's passage is by no means a direct echo of Homer's, but the harmonies (and the disharmonies) are striking. Frank's reburial of Jerome [the young boy]'s father is a purifying act, atoning both for the

[99] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 123. Print.
[100] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 123. Print.

crimes of the white men who brought about his death, and of the protagonist's own guilt and shame about his actions in Korea."[101] However, I think it is important to push Roynon's analysis further and discuss the presence of gender identity and male/female cooperation in this moment. Frank does not bury the man alone, but with his sister. He chooses to include her in this ritualistic task instead of further isolating himself. He tells her: "Come on Cee…you have to come with me. Both of us have to be there."[102] Frank realizes that male strength does not equate to ignoring emotional strife. Instead, one can find power in acknowledging the past and accepting help from others. Frank and Cee find comfort in each other's presence; although they are of different genders, they have both felt isolated, unsure, and afraid in their lives. Morrison also chooses to end *Home* in a manner that highlights the role of race in the novel and how these two souls who have drifted apart over the years still feel the sting of racism. Their childhood memory is the foundation of what to expect, the cruel reality that Frank hears about at the train station, that Lily experiences when she is not allowed to rent an apartment due to the color of her skin, and what Cee endures as a lab rat for a doctor who embraces white supremacy. There is a common ground and a sense of understanding between these siblings. The horses are no longer considered the real men. Instead, Frank writes on the deceased man's marker: "Here Stands A Man."[103] Frank has identified what is means to be a man and this definition does not include obligatory numbness or fulfilling any societal expectation of perfection. The man they buried protected his son and defended his race by refusing to be treated like an animal. He allows his son to kill him in order to stop the

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[101] Roynon, Tessa, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition, Transforming American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 126. Print.
[102] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 141. Print.
[103] Morrison, Toni. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 146. Print.

horrid game and die as a real man instead of a monster. Frank writes the word “stands” to emphasize that although only lifeless bones are left of the man, his story stands as a reminder of what constitutes true bravery and compassion.

Chapter 4

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the complexities of male and female identities within the African American community. These complexities stem from those in the white community who choose to be violent and cruel and feel justified in their oppressive ways. The historical background I provided gave a necessary context of racial tensions in the United States, paving the way for Morrison's fictional but very historically relevant literary works. I explored societal norms and how these norms vary between the races. I also explained the connection between public violence and private strains within African American families and/or romantic relationships. Public oppression leads to private misery within the African American community and therefore affects the way in which the community functions. Finally, I analyzed the roles and characteristics of gender and how mental and and physical aspects of gender are identified in the novels.

Morrison's novels greatly focus on the motifs of alienation and misfortune, for her characters feel out of place and alone in society and at times, even within their own small, racially homogenous communities. Racial violence and tension acts as a catalyst and the foundation of these characters' fears and obstacles, pushing these men and women further into metaphorical corners and making productive communication more and more difficult. Instead, it is every man and woman for themselves, leading to hardened exteriors and reckless actions. The expectation to be victims of oppression courses through the veins of each member of the African American community and dates all the way back to slavery. This harsh reality never falters in Morrison's novels. However, Morrison highlights the power of friendship, family, companionship and

outreach in her books, counteracting oppression and leading to some sense of comfort. As literary scholar Schreiber argues, "[Morrison's characters] portray the psychological and cultural obstacles to such reconstruction, as well as the hard-won personal victories available through verbalization of trauma and community sharing."[104]

Morrison differentiates the genders in her novels by pointing out each gender's expected roles in society, their flaws, and internal struggles. However, she also blends their psyche together, emphasizing humanity at its core, stripped of societal influences. She proves that women can take on male roles such as independently providing for one's family and exploring one's sexuality in *Sula* and that men can and should recognize their emotional needs and ask for help in *Home*. Morrison therefore acknowledges gender distinctions but then challenges them, for it is difficult for the African American community to survive without defying and altering at least some of these traditional gender roles. The communities are handled somewhat differently in *Sula* and *Home* but a common element exists: people can never truly separate themselves from the community. Sula's community come together due to their mutual interest in gossiping about her sexual promiscuity and shocking independence. Sula wishes to distance herself from her community, struggling due to the lack of positive female influence in her life, and angry at the unfair expectations towards females and their sexuality. She is also unable to fully understand boundaries and appropriate behavior within female friendships. Sula eventually realizes that the community is as much a part of her as she is of them. Her last thoughts before her death are about Nel, of friendship rather than isolation. A similar argument can be made about Frank since he spends the majority of the novel away from

[104] Schreiber, Evelyn J. "Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison." *The Journal of African American History* (2010): 156. *Project Muse*. Web.

Lotus, traveling and running from his past. Frank finally returns to his hometown and is reunited with his sister who is his blood and part of his cultural and personal identity. He acknowledges the presence and influence one's home and past has on an individual. The towns described do not bask in comforting sunshine and are not filled with the pleasant sound of laughter. They are towns that hold the weight and burden of racism, poverty, violence, and abuse. They do not prevent but instead cultivate feelings of low self-worth and uncertainty about one's identity and place in the world.

I end my thesis with a quote by Norman Page regarding the power and influence of the novel: "Like some vigorous organism in a speeded-up Darwinian ecosystem, [the novel] adapts itself quickly to a changing world. War and revolution, economic crisis and social change, radically new ideologies such as Marxism and Freudianism, have made this century unprecedented in human history in the speed and extent of change, but the novel has shown an extraordinary capacity to find new forms and techniques and to accommodate new ideas and conceptions of human nature and human experience, and even to take up new positions on the nature of fiction itself."[105] Morrison uses the novel to discuss the human experience but pushes the experience further by emphasizing the role of race, gender, and other outside forces and how such forces affect the inner-thinking and outer expressions of the individual. Morrison writes about how the single idea and argument of white supremacy can affect an entire group and therefore an entire nation. Hatred directed towards one group leads to hatred of the self. The novel dissects the fears, wrongdoings, and misguided assumptions that are deeply rooted in these towns, poisoning their relationships. Novel as a form transforms over time and acts like a

[105] Page, Norman. "General Editor's Preface." Preface. *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's, 1995. vii. Print.

chameleon. It takes on the challenge of correctly representing and analyzing the time period the story is set in as well as the time period the author lives in through the distinct style and construction of the text. Morrison's works involve a bold honesty and the bitter taste of violence that one does not normally find in other literary genres and ages, such as 19th century British literature. African American literature carries the weight of oppression and a sorrowful tone that is difficult to compare to other literary classics. Morrison's novels represent the modern era but critique and reflect on traditional and corrupt ideas.

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