Something Other Than A Family Quarrel: The Beautiful Boys in Morrison’s Sula

Toni Morrison’s second novel, praised for its celebration of girls’ friendships, is dedicated to boys. The writer inscribes Sula to her young sons, whom she “miss[es] although they have not left [her].” By deliberately creating a vacuum with, and then extending the storyline beyond, Sula’s death, Morrison’s book, like her dedication, illustrates that it is “sheer good fortune to miss somebody long before they leave you.” In technique and focus, Sula embraces absence, inversion, doubling, opposite, and other, attributes which, along with community and a sense of humor, are the secrets of African American endurance captured in the opening “nigger joke.”

Morrison’s is the “womanist” insight that relationships between African American men and women must be understood not only in terms of the intersections of gender and race, but also in terms of their participation in a larger, historically racist culture. The inversions and conundrums which are essential to the survival of the African American community, and a credit to African American ingenuity, critique power and injustice in America. Sula challenges us to reconsider how histories of tops and bottoms, ups and downs within American social structures become convoluted into the ironic hierarchies and differences in African American society. The book also reminds us to miss our beautiful black boys before they leave us, to consider any difficulties between black men and women in a cultural as well as racial and sexual context.

Because of her delight in flouting traditional or fashionable bottoms and tops, Morrison has been taken to task by (white) feminist critics for not supporting the party line. In her 1971 article “What the Black Woman Thinks About Women’s Lib,” she had already begun to answer these critics with the blunt response: “Well, she’s suspicious of what she calls ‘Ladies’ Lib.’ It’s not just the question of color, but of the color of experience” (15).

The essay explains that attempting to find consensus among African American women on any subject is a doomed prospect because they have consistently, and deliberately, defied classification. However, it surmises that consensus about and support for the women’s liberation movement, viewed by many black women and men alike as a predominantly white “family quarrel,” has been even more elusive because relationships between black women and black men have simply been historically different from the majority of their white counterparts. Accused of portraying black women in some novels as victims and in others as castrating females, Morrison retorts that black women have borne their crosses “extremely well” and that “everybody knows, deep
down, that black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that black women didn’t take any part in that” (Stepto 384). Like Zora Neale Hurston, Morrison evaluates the position of the black woman in America as having been for years “de mule uh de world,” a scapegoat for black male frustration and rage but nonetheless a stubborn workhorse liable to kick or bite upon provocation and seeming not to have become the “true slave” that white women discern in their own history (14). Forced out of her “profound desolation” to invent herself, the black woman has combined being a responsible person with being female. As such, she has come to feel morally superior to white women, and to their men, and free to confront her world, including her man, on her own terms (“What the Black Woman Thinks” 63).

Nellie McKay distinguishes between black and white feminist literary traditions by the presence or absence of their creative ancestors. She observes that many white women writers claim to have invented the authority for their voices in an effort to break the silence of what Virginia Woolf calls “Shakespeare’s sisters.” Contemporary black women writers, however, look to the examples of their grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters to continue a powerful artistic heritage that is not white and not male (McKay 399). Sapphires and Geraldines instead of Philomelas and Lavinias, African American women have traditionally participated in the community “Signifyin(g)” and storytelling. Describing the women in her own family as the “culture-bearers,” Morrison, like Hurston, remembers the storytelling as a shared activity between men and women. Recollecting no imbalance or struggle for dominance within her community’s gender relationships, she uses the word comrade to describe the marriages that she knew. While many could not read, her foremothers were articulate, and their talents were on display for their immediate family and extended community members as well as for white society (McKay 398-99). Henry Louis Gates, Jr., traces this androgynous nature of African American discourse and hermeneutics back to the Yoruba trickster figure of Esu, depicted as paired male and female statues or as one bisexual figure (29-30), which supports Morrison’s claim that hers is a discursive tradition that escaped the trap of sexism inherent in Western discourse.

Morrison’s approach to race and gender is perhaps best captured by referring to Barbara Christian’s assessment of Alice Walker, who, like Morrison, is often labeled a feminist writer. Christian believes that Walker challenges the definition of feminism as it is formulated by most white American feminists, insisting that white feminists as well as some black people define the issues in terms of blacks on one hand and (white) women on the other and, in so doing, deny the black woman her womanhood. While Walker acknowledges the hesitancy of many black women to address the problems of sexism because they feel they must protect black men (“Remembering Luna and Ida B. Wells”), she also argues that critics of both races and genders miss the obvious fact that people of color come in both sexes. In refusing to elevate sex above race or race above sex, Walker, like Morrison, “aligns herself neither with prevailing white feminist groups nor with blacks who refuse to acknowledge male dominance in the world.” Because Morrison’s work “does not yield to easy generalizations and nicely packaged clichés,” she continues to “resist the trends of the times without discarding the truths upon which they are based” (Christian 91-92).

A key to Morrison’s success in countering the temptations of feminist sexism is her use of male characters. Song of Solomon can be singled out as showcasing black men. The writer herself says of the book, “Men are more prominent. They interested me in a way I hadn’t thought about before, almost as a species” (Watkins 50).
However, because of the dual-gendered emphasis of her personal and artistic background and because her writing has become increasingly preoccupied with the "relationships of black men and black women and the axes on which those relationships frequently turn . . .," all of Morrison's books, including *Sula*, explore masculine types. They also examine ways in which stereotypes underlie men's individuation and affect how men and women "complement each other, fulfill one another or hurt one another and are made whole or prevented from wholeness by things that they have incorporated into their psyche" (Davis 419). Identifying metaphors of the masculine in *Song of Solomon* as flying and dominion, Stephanie Demetrakopoulos argues that Morrison's male figures exist in vacuums, are often pathologically out of balance, ungrounded in nature or the feminine, and are isolated from and rejected by masculine white culture. Describing the values of these men as being influenced by but not characteristic only of African American culture, she maintains that "most men in the world have never really known a woman" (85-86).

While Morrison calls upon critics to address in depth some of the major themes that constitute the African American canon, including the men who are "outside of that little community value thing," she does not appear to agree with Demetrakopoulos's assessment of black male "archetypes." On the contrary, Morrison applauds what she calls the "incredible amount of magic and feistiness in black men that nobody has been able to wipe out. But everybody has tried" (Stepto 383-84). Viewed collectively, Morrison's male characters reveal that issues of gender, race, and class cannot be separated; the conflicts between African American men and women result not from a sexual but from a cultural disease, the cure for which would require radical structural surgery. Viewed specifically, *Sula* reveals that the traditional African American community is not ready to accept a woman who assumes a man's freedom. Together, because "they were neither white nor male, [Sula and Nel] had set about creating something else to be" (52). Like Ajax, Sula remains that free something. Finally, however, even Nel rejects Sula, and thus the masculine part of herself, saying to her alter ego, "You can't act like a man" (142).

In *Sula* Morrison turns intermittently from her study of a female African American scapegoat to focus on the men. Following hard upon the relief experienced by residents of the Bottom with Sula's death, for example, is a description of dislocation. The figure for Christmas-after-Sula is the "curled bodies of men who chose to sleep the day away rather than face the silence made by the absence of Lionel trains, drums, cry-baby dolls and rocking horses." Teenagers sneak into the local theater to let Tex Ritter "free them from the recollection of their fathers' shoes, yawning in impotence under the bed" (154). Such a scene predicts what Christina Hoff Sommers calls *The War Against Boys*, a crisis in masculinity brought on, this feminist scholar claims, by misguided feminist assertions about gender. Although Morrison, too, is deeply concerned about boys and about the disintegration of black male and female relationships in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she denies that the crux of the problem is gender: "Many of the problems modern couples have are caused not so much by conflicting gender roles as by other 'differences' the culture offers" (McKay 404).

*Sula* also anticipates Mary Pipher's popular psychological study of the cultural abuses that contemporary America inflicts upon its adolescent girls, and both point out that women need to reconnect with and preserve the androgynous wholeness of their childhood. To do this they must address the men in their lives in order
to accept the masculine in themselves. As Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One’s Own*, there is a space the size of a shilling in the back of a gender’s collective head that must be described by the opposite gender because it cannot be seen except by the other. While many of the writers in Woolf’s white canonical tradition, however, upstage men in favor of a central female character, or back-stage women to spotlight men, Morrison has insisted upon having her male characters share center stage with her females to perform the story of male-female relationships in the African American community.

Examining even the minor male characters in *Sula* reveals that, while they certainly act structurally as a supporting cast, they function as far more than cues for the leading women. The novel opens with absence and inversion, with an elegiac lament for a Community systematically pulled out by its roots and a history of the “nigger joke” that turns things upside down and which gave that community its name, the Bottom. Following references to a white “they” who tore down the pear trees where children perched to yell their greetings to passers-by, the first image of an adult member of this eradicated black Community is male: the “feet in long tan shoes once pointing down from chair rungs” (3). The bottommost part of the body and pointing downward, these stylish male feet become a synecdoche for the entire Community, the part left to speak up for the whole gone missing.

The “nigger joke,” told wryly on themselves by these “feet” and by downtrodden black and discouraged white folks seeking “a little comfort somehow,” portrays a good white farmer who promises his slave freedom and some fertile bottomland if the slave will complete certain tasks. The chores done, the slave is freed but tricked into choosing rocky hilltop instead of rich valley property because the hill land is named by the slavemaster as the “bottom of heaven—best land there is” (4–5). Told from the Community’s perspective, this joke is Morrison’s analogy for African American “Signifyin(g),” a rhetorical self-defense which protects the integrity of the black self through a clever inversion of the context in which (white) society defines value. African American children are trained in Signifying rituals from an early age as a kind of verbal jujitsu, a black Community watch. Like a Shakespearean fool, humorous, frequently prevented only by his or her wit from being insolent, the Signifier is allowed license.

The boys draped gracefully over chairs in front of the Time and a Half Pool Hall begin their passage into manhood by mastering such rites in Morrison’s Bottom Community. Instead of the slack, sullen-eyed loafers they frequently appear to the outside world, she presents them as alert creatures with panther eyes and creamy vanilla haunches, virile pool haunts of a “sinister beauty” (49). Those who remain framed and tamed by the Community, their lust tempered to kindness as they move into elderhood, take on names, powers, duties as comrades to the women. These elders include Mr. Buckland Reed, who appears eight times in the novel as Eva’s longtime friend, advisor, and retainer. He of the gold teeth and practical wife cautions Eva against “naming” the deweys but encourages her talent for dream and fortune-telling by taking her lottery numbers in to play. While he has little success in subduing...
Eva’s godlike arrogance and merely stands aghast when Sula commits her to a home, the sturdy Community elder escapes the final apocalypse when people go “too deep, too far” (162). Hospital orderly Willy Field is another of the old guard faithful to Eva. Finding her blood staining his just-mopped floors, Willy saves her from bleeding to death by shouting for the nurses who had ignored the one-legged black woman in their fascination with Hannah’s charred flesh. His good deed wins him Eva’s curses. The Mr. half of Mr. and Mrs. Suggs joins his wife in taking Eva’s children for the year and a half Eva is gone and in hoisting and throwing the tomato-filled water tub onto Hannah, a last-ditch effort to put out the flame-crazed woman. Reverend Deal provides rituals like Chicken Little’s funeral ceremony as he leads the Community women in venting their long-suppressed pain, and Uncle Paul brings Hannah two bushels of Kentucky Wonders to can. Even male elders in the extended Community offer support and nurturance to the women who need them. Mr. Henri Martin writes Helene about her grandmother’s illness, conveying the dying woman’s silent plea that her granddaughter make the trip to New Orleans. When Helene and Nel arrive at the black-wreathed house, he, alone inside with Cecile’s body, opens the door and quietly goes about completing the funeral arrangements.

Ignored or disdained outside the Community, these elders have a usefulness and dignity within its framework apart from yet connected to the women. The Bottom is not powerful enough, however, to contain the destructive influences of the (white) outside world on young black male development, and few of the beautiful boys remain or return to take their place as elders. Morrison’s observations about boys are echoed by psychologist Michael Gurian. Morrison notes that “men love the company of other men, . . . enjoy the barber shop and the pool room” because “they aren’t just interested in themselves”; hence relationships among men are “based on something quite different” from those among women (Stepto 387). Gurian defines this “something” as often not “talk-dependent!” but “proximity- and activity-dependent” (53). As such, male adolescents, specified by Gurian to range from approximately nine to twenty-one years of age, need a “nurturing system, male-driven, in which discipline, morality teaching, and emotional sustenance are provided by males, for males” (72). Morrison notes that black males relate to each other regardless of class, implying that such is not the case in white culture (Stepto 388). She also observes, however, that the “rhythm of [male] lives is outward, adventuresome” (McKay 399). Whether or not other forces prevail upon them to stay, Nel’s “beautiful boys in 1921,” or any other year, are biologically hardwired to venture out.

The Community can provide a self-respecting place for its male children and its elders, but its boys on the threshold of manhood need to go out the door. The masculinity of the “smooth vanilla crotches” spread invitingly wide on chairs in front of the pool hall is certainly not nurtured, sustained, or guided by the white male world that awaits it outside the Bottom. Those whose virility drives them outward usually become the black soldiers with the “closed faces” and “locked eyes” who can offer Helene no compassion for her humiliation by the white conductor on the southbound train. Watchfully indifferent to her apologetic voice and eagerness to please, the soldiers’ expressions become downright stricken with every submissive “Sir” that the elegantly attired Helene uses to address the red-neck who insolently calls her “gal” and tells her to move her “butt.” Then as proud, class-conscious Helene is reduced to a foolish street pup smile, the muscles in their faces tighten, and Nel senses that they “were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had
not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile” (22). The “po’ white’s” unchecked disrespect of a “dictie” black woman furiously strips the soldiers of any claim to the white, upper-class knighthood they resent yet covet, and, simultaneously ashamed of her white damsel-in-distress behavior, they make no effort to be gallant to Helene even after the conductor’s disappearance. The “white man, period” has used Helene to emasculate the black soldiers, and Helene has been reduced by both white and black men from a thoroughbred to “de mule uh de world.” The animosity between the African American woman and men in this situation is created not by gender conflicts but by complex issues of race and class.

While there may be no white female characters in *Sula*, there is, in addition to the conductor, a chorus of minor white male characters who suggest the range of treatment African American boys can expect to experience from white men outside the Bottom. With one clear and two possible exceptions (the racially ambiguous Tar Baby and the church women’s “slim, young Jew”), white males are depicted as plagues. These plagues range from pests to predators to vultures to excess: from the manipulative white farmer of the “nigger joke,” evolving into the more directly aggressive entrepreneurs who tear down a Community to put in a golf course, to Mr. Hodges, owner of the funeral parlor who will bury anybody, including Sula, if there is a substantial enough death policy involved. There are variations on the redneck bully: the balding male nurse whose “care” for Shadrack in the army hospital is intimidation; the loafers with their “muddy eyes” and “tongues curling around toothpicks” standing like “wrecked Dorics” on train station platforms to prevent black female travelers from using the toilet (24); the Irish Catholic schoolboys who help to secure their immigrant parents’ place in the new world, and entertain themselves, by harassing black schoolchildren.

There is the law. Of three (white) officials, one policeman arrests and beats a drunken Tar Baby because the white mayor’s niece swerves her car to avoid hitting him only to hit another car. One more example of a white man corrupted by absolute power over black people, this policeman then forces his charge to lie in his own excrement. Two other sheriffs and the bargeman who discovers Chicken Little’s body become plagues on the black Community by virtue of neglect or distorted kindness. The sheriff who jails the shell-shocked Shadrack for drunkenness quickly recognizes his prisoner’s mental trauma. He then becomes yet another cog in the white-controlled machine which fails black veterans when he sends Shadrack home, untreated, amongst the squash in a farmer’s wagon. The sheriff who reluctantly receives Chicken Little’s body suggests that the bargeman who delivered it throw it back in the river. Having gotten involved, and wishing he hadn’t, only because the body is that of a child, the bargeman complains all the while about niggers killing their young. Yet he complies with the sheriff’s suggestion to dump the small form in the burlap sack onto a ferryman who will take it to Meridian the next day. Finally, there are the patronizing missionaries, the generic white people who come with Christmas candy and cast-offs but glean barely a nod from the sullen natives.

There is, however, one clear exception to the Community’s plague of white male voices. Disdaining to pay respect to someone who, they believe, has caused them so much pain, the Bottom refuses out of pride or vengeance or spite to participate in Sula’s final disposition. When after two days Nel reports her body to the hospital, then the mortuary, then the police, it is the white men who finally take responsibility for the dead pariah. The police question the Community for hours but can ascertain only Sula’s first
name. It is the white men who remove, prepare, dress, and bury Sula’s body. With this codicil to her narrative on white engagement with the black community, Morrison both refuses to contribute to oversimplified race propaganda and underscores the moral ambiguity that is at the core of the novel.

Set against this chorus and clash of black and white male voices, Morrison creates a number of more fully realized but still secondary African American male characters. First, she explores how the absence of several men affects Nel and Sula’s childhood. While the Wright and Peace households showcase the women, they are replete with men but noticeably lacking in husbands and fathers. Morrison represents the Wright line of women by the “disgust on the face of the dead [Cécile],” as expressing a distorted sexuality (28). While the tiny, soft Rochelle works as a whore, both by choice and in reaction to her mother’s Catholic repressions, Helene reacts against her mother and follows Cécile’s stifled, class-conscious path, raising her own daughter to “pull” her nose. None of these women is comfortable expressing affection either to children or to men. Helene’s need for both becomes manipulation, and Nel’s a “cumbersome bear-love” (138). The one man who is part of the lives of all of the Wright women, Wiley Wright, is so by default. Pressured by his great-Aunt Cécile and her granddaughter to turn his enchantment with Helene into a marriage proposal, the middle-aged ship’s cook takes his bride away from the Sundown House and puts her “in a lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window” (17). While he worships his graceful wife, mostly from afar, Helene is quite content that he is in port only three days out of sixteen. Wiley is, in fact, simply Helene’s sometime “john.” Both are elevated in Community status by the niceties of marriage, but neither is protected from white male disrespect by the wife’s beauty, manner, bearing, or possessions. Although Cécile attempts to extricate her granddaughter from the influences of the Sundown House, Helene still raises her daughter with the view, reinforced by Wiley’s absence, that wives trade sex for security.

Unlike the patronymic Wright women who are named for Helene’s absent and unmissed husband, the matronymic Peace household is named for the women who, with the exception of Eva’s husband, love maleness for its own sake. While Helene’s husband Wiley Wright might be described as a sketch in small of Nel’s fully realized husband Jude Greene, Boy Boy, Eva’s husband, is a precursor to Ajax, Sula’s lover, without the latter’s respect for women. Gone like Wiley during most of his five-year marriage to Eva, when Boy Boy is at home he does “whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (32). Like Ajax, he leaves not because of Eva’s possessiveness but because, like Hurston’s Joe Starks, he is futilely seeking white male approbation through the acquisition of “shine” (36). Another Community female forced by hard times to postpone her pain, Eva has no idea what she should or will feel when her husband returns for a visit. When he struts into her house, the picture of shine, but makes no reference to his children, Eva realizes that underneath his aura of leisure and new money there is “defeat in the stalk of his neck and the curious tight way he held his shoulders” (36). She is able to divert her pain into a pleasurably intense hatred of Boy Boy, however, only when the raucous laughter of the woman waiting for him outside reminds her suddenly of big-city ruthlessness. Eva’s children, and Sula, are prey to the twisted love at the center of her life, created in large part by Boy Boy’s absence.

With these marriages Morrison analyzes ways in which African American men and women deal with unsatisfying relationships often caused by the defeats they suffer from white discrimination by employing various
scapegoats, usually within their own community. She places ultimate responsibility for many of their problems, however, on the black community's emulation of (white) cultural ideals about romantic love and acquisition. Denying her sexuality to gain possession and position, Helene welcomes the distance from her husband that Wiley's pedestal allows her, while damaging her child. Defeated by his quest for shine, Boy Boy projects his frustrations onto his wife, who then converts her anger at him into fuel for a meanness that will give her life meaning but will damage her children. Connections severed, the men roam, the women remain, and the children react. Only in Rekus and Hannah do we find the fleeting potential for a nurturing marriage. Like Hurston's playfully anti-establishment Tea Cake, Rekus is a "laughing man," and, tellingly, like Tea Cake he dies young. Comfortable with her sexuality like Hurston's independent Janie, Hannah has the generosity, self-reliance, and courage to see to her own physical needs. After Rekus's death, without the "slightest confusion about work and responsibilities," she will make love to a man and wash his wife's dishes in the same afternoon (41). For Hannah male touch is natural, not shameful, and not associated with money or necessarily with marriage. With her husband's absence, however, she loses interest in commitment and settles for sex. While a number of her male characters are not absent and do provide stability for the Community, Morrison maintains that stability is distinct from possessiveness. In fact, her work suggests that one partner's desire to possess the other does more to destroy than stabilize male-female relationships.

Because the Peace women embrace but do not try to captivate maleness, that household is full of beautiful boys. However, because Eva's love has been twisted by the need to sacrifice "an arm and a leg" so that everybody can survive, her love also distorts those boys. A god among men, she collects and then renames them according to a private scheme of affection, whim, grim humor, and meanness. Named Ralph, Eva's last child and only son is, in accord with his color but to his detriment, the "Plum" of her eye. During the hungry first months after Boy Boy leaves, Plum takes his father's place in bed with Eva while the two girls sleep on the floor, absorbing so much of his mother's milk that he becomes physically unable to eliminate on his own. In a desperate attempt to unblock him, Eva shoves "the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass." Afterwards, she articulates her association of food and selfhood with an oath grotesquely reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara's radish epiphany just before intermission in the film version of Gone With the Wind. Miss Scarlett's melodramatic "I'll never be hungry again" becomes Eva's understated, "Uh uh. Nooo" (34). When Eva grimly, and mysteriously, acquires the money to build her idiosyncratic Tara, Plum, to whom she hopes to bequeath everything, "float[s] in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war" (45). When he returns a shadow of his sweet self and addicted to heroin, Eva dreams that he is trying to climb back into her womb. Though she has for years coped grimly with her own suffering, she cannot bear her son's; godlike, she sacrifices him in a baptism of fire. Plum is the son protected but also prevented from growing up by the love of the powerful black matriarch.

Eva has several other "boys" who are paradoxically saved and destroyed by her love. Giving a small room off the kitchen to a beautiful, fair-haired mountain boy who never eats and does not speak above a whisper, Eva insists that he is white and maliciously calls him Tar Baby. While on one hand his name is wonderfully incongruous with his milky complexion, on the other it is a ruthlessly penetrating application of the African American folktale to signify on Tar Baby's silence and passive acceptance of
and passive acceptance of abuse. Although his “blood” remains a matter of debate, the Community welcomes his mournful tenor twang and tolerates without interference his single-minded intent to drink himself to death. Raised in the hills, Tar Baby has not been acculturated in the Signifying tactics of humor and subversion as antidotes to pain. Thus the Bottom’s indifference to his self-destructive behavior is partly the Community’s contempt for an individual who would take himself seriously enough to commit suicide. Eva takes the boy in but does not give him the skills necessary for his survival. She does provide three other strays with an innovative means of taking care of themselves, but her technique ultimately stunts their growth. Out of a folk wisdom that anticipates psychological studies such as Gurian’s, Eva understands that, unlike girls who tend toward pairs, boys need extensive clans or “gangs” to identify with and realize individuality within. Ignoring obvious differences in physical appearance, name, and age, Eva perceives from their wildness the boys’ need for a system and, calling all three “Dewey,” she leaves them to form the decimals. Slowly each child comes out of the cocoon he was in when somebody gave him away and ties his shoelaces to the laces of the others in the deweys’ favorite game of chain gang. While Morrison feels compelled to criticize the limitations of communities, she also recognizes the value of community to insure human survival. Individually each Dewey is a lost boy; collectively, as the deweys or Lost Boys, they find an identity. Even their white teacher is astonished at how much the deweys, who initially look nothing alike, become gradually indistinguishable. While the dewey system and chain gang serve as a collective self, however, they also consume the individuality of these Lost Boys and prevent their growing up. The Library of Congress eventually rejected the Dewey Decimal System because catalogers found it too restrictive, and chain gangs are, obviously, constraints within the prison system. Gurian notes that the ideal clan requires adult male participation as positive role models for its boys. A mysterious god of three in one, the deweys form a gang that is “inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves” (38). With the absence of committed adult males to bond with or emulate, the deweys remain “stouthearted, surly, and wholly unpredictable” children (39). Attaining an adult height of forty-eight inches, they develop only the skill of protecting and nurturing themselves; they stop growing except for “their magnificent teeth” (74).

Morrison creates one final minor male character who, though not a member of Eva’s clan, has a significant influence on her granddaughter and, through Sula, on Eva. We meet the little boy dressed in oversized knickers just after Sula has overheard Hannah declare that she loves but does not like her daughter. Bewildered and hurt, Sula, together with Nel, copes with her pain by acting it out. Lying flat on the grass, foreheads almost touching, she and Nel methodically attack tiny pieces of the life around them—grass, twigs, the earth. Then they collapse their separate “depressions” together and throw all of the “small defiling things” they can find into the hole, refilling it with soil and smoothing over the grave. The ritual does not completely pacify them, however, and, picking his nose, Chicken Little wanders conveniently into range. Hannah’s declaration has excited as well as hurt her daughter. Adrenalin pumping, Sula invites Chicken to view the world from a detached perch high in the branches of a tree. Excited in turn, Chicken is escorted safely down but swung wildly by Sula out over the river, where he can neither swim nor fly. He becomes merely “something newly missing” in the water.
of children as the excitement feeds on itself. Like his namesake, Chicken Little is gullible. While no sky falls on his head, he is engulfed by the water, the element associated throughout the novel with Sula. It is the “overflowing release of Sula’s hurt emotions . . . that results in her accidental drowning of Chicken Little” (Christian 59). Sula’s use of Chicken as a scapegoat for her fear predicts that she will put Eva away because the old woman frightens her. Like Eva, when Sula is afraid for her other(s), she cuts off part of herself; when she is afraid for herself, she spills her “meanness” onto others. Little Chicken becomes, like Pecola of The Bluest Eye, “a total and complete victim” of the chain of abuse and fear surrounding him (Stepto 384). He also becomes, however, the means by which Sula is set dangerously free from any context, any community; having killed, even accidentally, she is no longer afraid of death. Although the treatment of men by characters such as Sula and Eva provides fuel for critics who accuse Morrison of creating catastrophic women, Morrison is actually more interested in the forces, inside and outside the African American community, that mutilate both men and women.

She does, however, create boys in Sula to illustrate how community influences male individuation, both positively and negatively. She also creates three representative masculine types into which these boys develop. These types are characteristic of but not necessarily restricted to the African American community, or even to men.

The first type is the color of money, Jude Greene, the black male resentful yet envious of white male power. True to his name, twenty-year-old Jude is betrayed by his “craving to do the white man’s work” and, in turn, betrays his wife and children (128). While Morrison associates the color yellow with sexuality and vitality, green suggests degrees of order: from the male nurse in the “apple green suit” who confines Shadrack, to the “green pitcher” containing the yellow lemonade Eva serves to Boy Boy upon his return visit, to Boy Boy’s trophy woman in her “pea-green dress” leaning against the smallest pear tree as she waits for him outside, to the green silk ribbon that signals to Ajax Sula’s newfound feelings of possession for him, to the shabby green coat Nel wears as she turns to leave Sula for the last time thinking how much her old friend has cost her. Because he has not “touched the borders of his own life,” has not freed himself to create his own order, Jude is easily threatened and has everything to prove (Stepto 385). Abundant signs betray his tentative masculine individuality, his dependence on the group, his lack of self-control: “Well-liked” by the Community, he is the tenor of Mount Zion’s Men’s Quartet; his job waiting tables at the Hotel Medallion is a “blessing” to his parents and siblings; longing to exchange his thin-soled shoes and “woman’s work” for the physical demands and camaraderie of the road men, he wants to help build the New River Road, not travel it. When his hurt at having his labor rejected in favor of “thin-armed white boys” turns into shame and rage, he turns to marriage with a pliant and nurturing Nel as a means of proving his manhood. Marriage for Jude and Nel is mutually self-denying. Through Jude, Nel acquires vicarious pain; with Nel, Jude is “head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity.” To the detriment of her individuality as well as his, the “two of them together . . . make one Jude” (83).

While the narrator speculates about and Nel finally asks Sula directly why she had sex with Jude, the novel addresses only by implication why Jude has sex with Sula. One answer is that here form follows function, the absence of an answer is the answer. Along with Plum and Tar Baby, Jude is one of the most passive male figures in
Sula, and, true to form, he allows Sula to use him merely to fill up some space. A second answer is that, since he cannot usurp white male power, he will conquer the masculine black female. A third is that his incomplete masculinity is attracted to the masculine in Sula. When a whiny Jude looks to his wife for support about some petty insult done to him at work, Sula interrupts to instruct him in the defensive tactics of Signifying, offering him not “milkwarm commiseration” but the self-mocking irony of another “nigger joke” (102-04). He then acknowledges to himself that Sula is not conventional feminine marriage material; she “stir[s] a man’s mind maybe, but not his body” (104).

Jude is simply not whole enough to be a real partner for anyone. He has not integrated the masculine and feminine parts of himself and so remains a boy. Gurian describes four elements that represent the core of manhood and ten “integrities” taught to both boys and girls around the world as the foundations of adulthood. Because he is missing several of these, Jude’s self is undeveloped or damaged. The white community prevents him from participating in healthy, life-sustaining enterprise. The black community has not provided him with psychological, emotional, or sexual integrity, so he turns to a woman for the kind of support and “developmental experience that extended families are supposed to give” (Gurian 229-75). As Morrison comments, “a man like Jude, who was doing a rather routine, macho thing, would split” because he is threatened by difference or disapproval. Just the “requirements of staying in the house and having to apologize to his wife were too much for him” (Stepto 385).

If Jude is associated with the order and containment of earth green, Ajax is connected with the chaos and freedom of sky blue. The last image we have of Sula as a girl is a “slim figure in blue, gliding with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road” (85). Upon the woman’s return to the Bottom, Ajax recognizes his affinity with her and picks two bottles of milk off the porch of some white family. Framed by “a slick blue sky,” he holds them up to her like a trophy through the blue glass of her front door (124). Ajax suspects that Sula is one of two women he knows “whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him” (127). Thus his offering to her is not the milk itself but the clean lines and aesthetic solidarity of the bottles. Anticipating his Song of Solomon successor Milkman, the gift also indicates Ajax’s connection with the feminine. Like Kingfish of the Amos ’n’ Andy radio and television series, Ajax is, depending upon one’s perspective, outlaw or free man, anarchist or victim; he is certainly, like Sula, the artist seeking his form.

Ajax represents the African American version of the Ulysses theme in literature, the figure of the male in motion, the traveling man seeking not to obtain the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow but simply to know what is at the end of the rainbow. Historically, African American men have had no land, held no dominion; moving is what they do. Like Sula, Ajax has limited ties with community. Like Sula, he is curious, and fearless, and adventurous, and in the process of finding and knowing, he is also making himself. While Morrison admits that social critics describe this quality of leaving home, and their children, as a major failing of black men, she views it as “one of the most attractive features about black male life,” part of their interesting magic (Stepto 392).

Morrison expresses Ajax’s curiosity, sense of adventure, and need for freedom in his fascination with airplanes, the sky-blue form of transportation that supplanted trains as lovers in the black male psyche, captured in stories such as James Alan McPherson’s “A Solo Song: For Doc.” Even more than by planes, however, Ajax is enchanted by his mother, an
“evil conjure woman,” drawing his own artistic power from the feminine. Unlike Sula, he likes milk, and his kindness to women in general is a habit he acquires from dealing with a mother who inspires thoughtfulness and generosity in her sons. Because his female model is an articulate woman absorbed in the folk arts, whose absolute tolerance allows him the freedom to be himself, he is attracted to and curious about the elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behavior that constitutes Sula. Because, other than his mother, “he had never met an interesting woman in his life,” Ajax seeks in Sula the mental stimulation that disturbs Jude. Sula finds pleasure in “the fact that he talked to her” (127).

Traditional work “don’t do nothing” for Ajax, who has grown up admiring the creativity of the occult artist, and his playful gifts to Sula, chosen not for their monetary but their aesthetic value, reflect her own views about labor (142). Morrison comments that, because of their history, white women call the opportunity to work liberation. Forced to work, black women call it responsibility, and Sula takes greater pleasure in Ajax bringing her blueberries, butterflies, and a whistling reed than a steady paycheck (“What the Black Woman Thinks” 64). Her “lawless” nature responds to this complex individual who reflects the “tremendous possibility for masculinity among black men,” found frequently among musicians and artists, the unemployed and imprisoned, for “going all the way within [their] own mind[s] and within whatever [their] outline[s] might be” (Stepto 386).

Contrary to Demetrakopoulos’s statement that most men never really know a woman, Morrison depicts Ajax as understanding more about women than Sula or Nel do about men. It is Ajax who recognizes that Nel is seeking her own “misery” through Jude; it is Ajax who listens to Sula more than he speaks and, unintimidated by her, elicits the brilliance he expects from her. His “clear comfort at being in her presence, his lazy willingness to tell her all about fixes and the powers of plants, his refusal to baby or protect her, his assumption that she was both tough and wise—all of that coupled with a wide generosity of spirit only occasionally erupting into vengeance” allow him both connection with and separation from Sula’s individuality (128). Because Ajax is “secure enough and free enough and bright enough,” threats of emasculation by anyone disappear. Because his self is complete, he treats Sula not as an extension of himself, a vessel, or a symbol but as a whole person, and their sex is “not one person killing the other” but mutual enjoyment (Stepto 385). It is Sula who takes Ajax by the wrist and pulls him into Hannah’s pantry, freed forever by Eva’s absence from the clutter of accumulated goods, to pull pleasure from his “track-lean hips” (125). It is Sula who mounts Ajax, swaying over him like a tree as he calls soft obscenities up to her, and whose thighs “swallow” his genitals just as he swallows her mouth. Her water moistens his earth; his earth contains her water. Sula’s analytical speculations are the only jarring notes in this scene of harmonious feeling, as she wonders “when do the two make mud?” (131).

Her question is answered when Ajax leaves without a trace. Unlike Jude, he retreats not because he is humiliated but because Sula has upset the balance of self and other in their relationship. The very thing that attracts Ajax to Sula in the first place, her rejection of community control, is the one thing she relinquishes when she experiences Nel’s lesson of love as possession. Ajax is simply not interested in learning about the community values of marriage and fidelity which Sula learns when she gives herself over to be consumed by him. When she discovers “not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it,” and Ajax detects the scent of the nest, their sex becomes a killing thing: She asks him to “lean on [her]”; he “drag[s] her
under him and makes love to her with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton" (133-34).

Because Ajax owns nothing, Sula can find evidence for his presence in her life only in his "stunning absence," and her newfound loss of self turns her house into a shrine for him. She finally locates concrete evidence of his stay, ironically in his license to drive, and discovers that his real name is Albert (A.) Jacks. To Sula this is a clear sign that she never really knew her lover, and perhaps she didn’t. Under the influence of romantic convention, she began to visualize him as the strong or swift Greek warrior, or even the all-purpose cleanser, when his name actually suggests the playfulness of a child’s game. Unlike Jude, who uses Nel to complete him, and unlike Nel and Sula, who complete each other, Ajax is whole within himself. Integrating the feminine with the masculine, able to connect yet be separate, his complex wholeness draws Sula’s attraction and respect; she recognizes the gold leaf underneath the blackness of his face, and underneath that the cold alabaster, and underneath that the fertile loam. In Morrison’s complicated world created to resist easy definitions of good and evil, Ajax is no more a villain for leaving Sula than Sula is a villain for having this insight: “Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity” (136).

Both Jude, as product of order and community, and Ajax, as representative of freedom and individuality, deal with conflict from the perspective of what Morrison describes as a gender-determined social construction of reality that makes space “specific” for women, as well as specifically feminine, but unlimited for men. Transcending conflict in the form of flight is a male exercise of power because men “always want to change things, and women probably don’t,” approaching “conflict, dominion, and power” differently (Tate 122-23). Jude empowers himself by leaving home because he isn’t whole, Ajax because he is.

Shadrack, however, is able to cope with trauma, marginally regaining and retaining his self, while remaining on the fringe of community but only, like Lear, through madness. As Cedric Gael Bryant points out, madness is “power to the black community” (733). The inhabitants of the Bottom “knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn’t have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power” (15).

Unlike Jude and Ajax, but like Sula, Shadrack returns to the “soft voices” of his people to regain his power and maintain his identity, and, together with Sula, his oddness shapes the Bottom. Opening and closing Sula by focusing on Shadrack, Morrison writes that residents of the Community were “mightily preoccupied” with what Shadrack and Sula were all about and, by understanding their difference, with what “they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom” (6). She agrees with Michel Foucault that a crucial measurement of a community’s civilization and humanity is the way it addresses its “disjunctions” or misfits, recollecting that among the black communities of her childhood were found eccentricity and freedom in individual habits but conformity when the survival of the village was threatened (ix-x). Interested in who endures and why, Morrison is “enchanted, personally, with people who are extraordinary because in them [she] can find what is applicable to the ordinary” (LeClair 374). With Shadrack she creates a totally self-contained and ordered world, an organized form of madness, to contrast with Sula’s strangeness and emphasize that the Bottom responds to Shadrack in one way and to Sula in another.

Although Shadrack’s madness cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy, it does ironically balance Jude’s penchant for order and commu-
nity with Ajax's for freedom and individuality. In addition, Shadrack's reaction to the horrors of "other people's wars," like Wright's The Man Who Lived Underground, inverts assumptions about sanity and insanity (160). Perhaps sanity is the mind's refusal to accept a creed, endorsed by those in Wright's aboveground world, which values possessions more than life; perhaps this sanity can be maintained only from the perspective of those underground or, in Morrison's fiction, those up in the Bottom. In Sula Shadrack and Sula are up in the bottom of the Bottom. However, because it is predictable, the people can understand and thus assimilate Shadrack's madness in a way that they can never accommodate Sula's unexpected strangeness. Nonetheless, while they will buy Shadrack's fish but will neither wash nor bury Sula, they do not exile or destroy either one.

Shadrack is another of the Community's "beautiful boys" who, like Ajax, learns to Signify on the steps of the pool hall. At twenty-one Ajax is the delight of women for his virile grace and the envy of men of all ages for his "magnificently foul mouth," famous not for the viciousness of his curses but for the creative nastiness and imaginative phrasing of harmless epithets such as "shit" and "pig meat" (50). At a younger twenty Shadrack finds himself running with a headless comrade in 1917 across the fields of France and at twenty-two returns to Medallion "handsome but ravaged," still able to move even the most fastidious to reminisce about his pre-war beauty (7). At twenty-five and literally raving mad, he fights off the derision of the "letter heads" with curses that are "stingingly personal" and is the "only black who could curse white people and get away with it" (15, 62). Here Morrison contrasts the black male method of verbal sparring with the white male mode of physical battle and implies that the difference in tenor of the two boys' curses is the direct result of the manner of combat Shadrack experiences in the world outside the Bottom.

Like a character from Hemingway's fiction, Shadrack copes with an immense exterior space of unpredictable death, where the only order is the precision with which the military attends to the details of destruction, by retreating to a small, peaceful interior space over which he has complete control. His outwardly ramshackle but inwardly pristine shack is a metaphor for his state of being, and his sensual attention to the delicate rituals of fishing, a reminder of the tranquilizing effects of fishing on Nick in "Big Two-Hearted River," is his method of healing his wounded psyche. Morrison's use of fishing is also a way to emphasize Shadrack's connection with Sula, who is associated with water. "Permanently astonished" and hospitalized, Shadrack is able to hold himself together only by dreaming of soft voices and a river full of fish. He no sooner crosses the border of a frozen stream in France than the world explodes around him, and his shack is bound to the Community on the opposite bank of the river by a handmade bridge. Directed, water is a power of creation; loosed, a force of destruction. Shadrack's madness, caused by, rejected by, yet saner than the war going on outside the Community, is accepted by, contained by, and creatively assimilated into the flow of life up in the Bottom.

Morrison also connects Shadrack with Sula and Ajax by his sensitive artistic nature. Even in the midst of dirty, gray explosions, he wonders at the purity and whiteness of his cold breath, and he focuses on the color and arrangement of his unappetizing hospital food, taking comfort from the containment of its repugnance by the tray sections and absorbing the soothing equilibrium of its balance. Shell-shocked, he is terrified of the voice of the male nurse in the apple-green suit and what appears to him as the Jack-in-the-beanstalk sprouting of his fingers, associating one with military order and
the other with the uncontrollable destructiveness of his own hands. Even when he is safely back among his soft voices and Sula recognizes his harmlessness by the graceful arc of his fingers around wood (as he does hers by the "tadpole" over her eye), he will walk about with his penis out but will "never touch anybody, never [fight], never caress" (15). Relaxing in the hospital only when his hands are restricted by a straitjacket but released because of his disruptive panic, or the hospital's lack of space, Shadrack is immediately confronted with what to him is the bewildering chaos of grounds and floating paperdoll people, overwhelmed by his imagination and the freedom to cut out in a direction of his own.

Frantic that his monstrous hands cannot unloose his sore feet from the crippling double knots tied in his shoelaces by the white nurse, he continues on the road to try to "tie the loose cords in his mind" and discover the secret of who he is and why the nurse labels him "Private" (10). His bizarre behavior when officials force him to abandon his confinement, again like Wright's Fred Daniels, causes passengers in "dark, square cars [to shutter] their eyes at what they took to be a drunken man" (12). Feet "clotted with pain," paralyzed by a blinding headache, in the world outside the military shelter Shadrack can neither find a comfortable way to walk nor see himself clearly. His headache subsides, and his hands become "courteously still," however, when the police lock him in jail and he recognizes a familiar command to "fuck himself painted on the cell wall. He joyfully greets the blackness of his "indisputable presence" as he glimpses his reflection in the water of the cell toilet (12-13). In the traditions of Wright's and Ellison's invisible men and their allegorical journeys to selfhood, Shadrack finds enlightenment in darkness, sanity in madness, and freedom when the white authorities send him back up to the black Bottom.

As he struggles to emerge from his underground hibernation, Shadrack joins his invisible colleagues in their compulsion to speak out "on the lower frequencies" (Ellison 581). Finally free of white-imposed death, Shadrack offers a message to his Bottom people in the form of National Suicide Day, a ritual which "had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it" (14). Trading the Grim Reaper's sharp scythe for a comic cowbell and a hangman's noose, realizing that death's power lies in its unexpectedness, he proclaims to his people in the voice of the street preacher that the third day of the new year is "their only chance to kill themselves or each other" (14). Even Shadrack's name validates his prophetic purpose and his ability by virtue of his madness to withstand the fiery furnace.

Like Sula, who is buried as a witch, Shadrack's gift to the Community is to provide a scapegoat for their destructive fear and lead them to freedom from it. Unlike Sula, whose threatening awareness alienates her from a people who will love her when "Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith," Shadrack's childlike perception allows the people to institutionalize his message and to love him now. Their messages are two sides of the same symbol. Interpreting Shadrack's declaration of "Always" as his pronouncement doomimg her for her part in Chicken Little's drowning, Sula acknowledges the permanence of chaos and death, affirming that all of us are dying all of the time. For her the difference is in "dying like a stump" or living "like one of those redwoods," and in this context "being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it" (143-45). Shadrack's intention in telling her "Always," however, is to insure that Sula will not have to be afraid of "the change—the falling away of skin," to assure her of the permanence of order and life (157).

With Sula's death, the Bottom Community's reactionary effort is unnecessary, dislocation sets in, and
even Shadrack loses hope. In their des-
peration, the people finally heed
Shadrack’s call, but do so, ironically, in
Sula’s voice, freeing themselves briefly
from the weight of adult pain and fear
to laugh at death and embrace chaos.
Pausing at the site symbolizing their
possibility of connection to the outside
world, they “killed, as best they could,
the tunnel they were forbidden to
build.” Sula’s path to freedom is,
indeed, a risky one, and some go “too
depth, too far,” joining her in death
while Shadrack remains standing
above the furnace, still astonished,
ringing his bell (161-62).

The novel asserts that “sometimes
good looks like evil; sometimes evil
looks like good. . . . It depends on what
uses you put it to” (Stepto 381). Nel’s
acceptance of its laws heightens her
status within the Community but
leaves her alone and essentially non-
contributing; Jude’s compliance means
voluntary exile. Sula’s lawlessness uni-
fies a Community which then isolates
her within it; Ajax’s noncompliance
means voluntary exile. Only
Shadrack’s madness, existing outside a
social frame of reference, allows free-
dom of choice within place.

*Sula* also suggests that racial iden-
tity may collapse stereotypes about
gender. While the men—Jude, as order
and community; Ajax, as chaos and
individuality; and Shadrack, as
Dickinson’s “divinest sense” in much
madness—illustrate the novel’s mascu-
line types, these roles could also be
represented by the women—Nel, Sula,
and Ajax’s mother. Sula retorts to Nel’s
admonishment that she “can’t act like a
man”: “I’m a woman and colored.
Ain’t that the same as being a man?”
(142). Concerned with the integrity and
balance of male-female individuality
and relationship, and the roles that
black and white communities play in
sustaining or damaging both, Morrison
consistently refuses to elevate female
above male or male above female.

Nel’s fine cry of sorrow for Sula at the
conclusion of the book is both long and
round, but “it has no bottom and it
has no top” (174).

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Notes

1. Alice Walker defines a “womanist” as a “black feminist.”
2. Morrison’s “Recitatif” indicates that she is interested in exposing and exploring racial identifiers.
   The two figures appearing briefly in *Sula* who may be white and female, a hospital nurse (77) and a
   “red-haired lady” at Sunnydale (167), may also not be.
3. Amusing riffs on Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and Joni Mitchell’s *Big Yellow Taxi.*
4. The relative absence of male characters delineated by Morrison as “appendages” to her females
   juxtaposed with the idea that Eva loves maleness but lacks a leg signifies on the concept of penis
   envy with delicious irreverence.
5. Morrison is having some fun here with the stereotypes that (to white people) all black people
   look alike and that all black men are headed for prison.
6. The four elements comprising the core of manhood are: compassion, honor, responsibility, and
   enterprise. Gurian defines the ten “integrities” taught to children around the world as: lineal (or ances-
tral) integrity, psychological integrity, social integrity, spiritual integrity, moral integrity, emotional integrity, sexual integrity, marital (or gender) integrity, physical integrity, and intellectual integrity.

7. See Mayberry.


