

Fall 2018

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Kathleen, and Gayle Fallon. 2018. "'We Sick': The Deweys as Women's Willful Self-Destruction in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 15 (Fall): 1-17. 10.23860/jfs.2018.15.02.

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"We Sick": The Deweys as Women's Willful Self-Destruction in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison explores the complexities of race, gender, and matrilineal influence in *Sula*. Although much recent feminist criticism has addressed the operations of race and gender in the novel, this essay provides the first developed examination of Morrison's strategic use of three diminutive boys, all named "dewey," to emphasize the willfully self-destructive tendencies of the novel's female characters. Burdened with their community's limiting idealizations of femininity and motherhood, the women of *Sula* practice various forms of self-harm in an effort to develop and proclaim their holistic, autonomous selves. The deweys' mischievous childhood games foreshadow the consequences of female self-harm, but they also reveal the ways in which communal abuse is transformed by women into agency. A careful analysis of the deweys' significance is thus critical to any discussion concerning the relationship between *Sula*'s female characters and their community. The deweys are the key to uncovering the profound irony of self-destruction committed by women who strive to achieve independence while wrestling with the broader communal suffering they both inherit and transmit.

Keywords: Morrison (Toni), *Sula*, deweys, feminism, women, matriarchy, identity, community, foreshadowing

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Children are archetypal symbols of innocence, bittersweet reminders of humanity's prelapsarian condition and its loss through willful adult corruption. Some writers undercut the connotation of childhood with wholesomeness, however, depicting diminutive bodies possessed by adult malevolence in a manner that metaphorizes human depravity. In her 1973 novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison employs this technique to powerful effect, using the behavior of three small boys, all named "dewey," to emphasize and mirror the self-destructive tendencies of central female characters in her narrative. The intensity of these self-destructive inclinations seems to escalate in the course of the plot, producing a murder, a traumatic self-immolation, and finally the genocide of an entire town. The three boys appear immediately before each tragedy, and their actions both imitate and foretell the actions of the women whose lives intersect with theirs. Ultimately, the presence and function of the deweys highlight self-harm as an ironic agentic power exercised when characters attempt to reconcile what Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe identifies as "the existing double conflict between an African/Black unified self and a feminist self" (1992, 114). Though the possibility of this reconciliation is questioned throughout the novel, the final disappearance of the deweys—linked with a deadly cave-in—implies a cautiously optimistic future for those who strive to forge a holistic female identity.

Hoffarth-Zelloe is not the only scholar to consider *Sula*'s paradoxically dissonant portrayal of the holistic African/Black and feminist self. Recent trends in feminist scholarship concerning *Sula* focus on

the intersections of violence, mothering, and self-love. Motherly discipline in Morrison's text, for example, has become a popular site for analyses of the development of female identity and influence in Jim Crow America. Morrison's text features the aggressive self-injury of women characters, but it equally emphasizes the violent punishments levied by black women upon those for whom they act as caretakers. With the possible exception of Helene Wright, *Sula's* female caretakers form a collective antithesis of the idealized black mother living in the early twentieth century; as Parvin Ghasemi writes, "what distinguishes Morrison's mothers from ... stereotyped mother figures is their attempt at determining the course of their own and their children's destinies" (2010, 239). Put simply, motherly discipline in *Sula* can be read as a form of resistance against racist and misogynist cultural constructs. Amanda Putnam identifies brutal motherly discipline in Morrison's works as a rerouting of the abuse women endure from both family members and their larger communities: "While painful to absorb, this redirection can also be seen as an additional mothering lesson—an instinctive message teaching black children coping mechanisms within a world that denies and exploits their self-worth" (2011, 26). Essentially, such critical arguments delineate how the women of *Sula* reclaim abuse as discipline, strategically transmuting oppression into its subversion.

Though this essay is certainly concerned with the relationships between *Sula's* mothers and children, we would suggest that, just as mothers in *Sula* convert violent discipline into cultural subversion, women in *Sula* likewise internalize and transform abuse into a complicated and radical form of self-care. This self-care is radical because it often threatens to undermine the women's positions as caretakers of not only their children but also their physical selves, thereby equating self-preservation with self-impairment. This fatal conflation is consistently reified through the actions of the three deweys, whose blatant foreshadowing of harrowing events posits feminist resistance to cultural oppression as something equally deadly and inevitable. Put another way, women who cultivate holistic, agentic selves in *Sula* become cautionary tales not to other, individual feminists but to their broader communities. The deweys predict that women will inevitably transform communal abuse into agency—as the rising Sula Peace and Nel Wright learn to do—and that expressions of that agency will empower a communal "peace" and "right" effected by *women*, even if it destroys the women themselves.

The few scholars who have remarked on the deweys all seem to recognize their symbolic nature, in particular the Trinitarian dimension of their bond. Patricia Hunt and others argue that the three boys "can be seen as a disturbing fulfillment of the mystery of the Trinity" (1999, 166). Trudier Harris notes that they "figure more frequently as a concept than as separate entities in the novel," a view she expands in the following definition:

A dewey is an individual who exists on the borderline between tolerable behavior and trying out for reform school. A dewey is contained lawlessness, just as Shadrack is contained insanity. A dewey is rootless and uncommitted, existing from day to day with no knowledge of past or future. A dewey is an idea manifested in triplets whose very physical appearances defy that appellation. (1999, 116)

While Harris recognizes the deweys' significance as emblems of border crossing, she overlooks their implicit knowledge of the imminent effects of the Peace women's behaviors; the women work to control their environment despite the dramatic irony exhibited in the deweys' foreknowledge. The women may or may not discern the deweys' narrative function, but their efforts to intentionally predetermine and then construct themselves and their surroundings when their futures seem predestined figure the Peace women as more than simply tragic heroes—they refuse to be tragic by defining themselves not as virtuous victims but as social rebels who claim an agency that is also denied.

The deweys' Cassandric prophesies mirror the propulsive fatalism of their guardians: they predict outcomes but push toward rather than work to change these dire consequences. The deweys also lack an ability to define themselves, even negatively, against one another. In the only discussion of *Sula* that elaborates at length on the subject of the three boys, Philip Page comments on the deweys' apparent mental deficiencies and implausible rescue from motherless lives, observing that "their unity is achieved at the expense of each boy's individuality" (1995, 66). Likewise, Susan Neal Mayberry suggests that their name evokes the increasing obsolescence of the Dewey Decimal System and that their chain-gang games dramatize the restrictiveness of a form of punishment that erases individual identity (2003, 60). Their individual namelessness therefore points up their individual powerlessness—they are defined by function only, by that which they indicate, and their persons are collapsed into one as their guardians and, later, their community refuse to view them as separate beings. The resultant liminality the deweys inhabit (three-and-one, oracular but largely ignored) resembles "the struggling orphaned black culture" in which the Peace women struggle to assert themselves (Schreiber 2010, 188n21). However, the deweys' liminality simultaneously highlights the women's efforts to create individual, whole selves, to carve out a family and identity despite the misogyny and racism that pressure the women to shape themselves into socially acceptable stereotypes. Therefore, though they imply a somewhat fatalistic worldview, the deweys accentuate the Peace women's perverse but bold attempts at self-determination within a circumscribed existence. In dissolving the deweys by the novel's end, the author replaces the deweyan existentialism (Harris 1999, 116) that dominates the novel with a subtle feminist hope for a genuine and complete self-as-societal-actualization.

Morrison's choice of permanently juvenile male characters who "would never grow" (Morrison 1982, 84) to symbolize female characters' willful acts of devastation produces other important paradoxical implications in *Sula* as well. On the one hand, the deweys recall the juvenility of all the novel's men, who diversely "[remain] boys in mind" (84) and whose abandonment of the women intensifies the socioeconomic and emotional vacuums that precede the women's behavioral extremes. Eva Peace's aptly named husband, BoyBoy, leaves her and their three children in desperate poverty; Plum regresses into infant dependency; and even the charismatic Ajax eschews all commitments in order to preoccupy himself with airplanes and boyishly distracting entertainments. The men's impotence as victims, addicts, failures—or, at the very least, aimless wanderers—evidences an abdication of responsibility that further exposes their weakness. Eva is not fooled by BoyBoy's attempt to feign the moneyed player: "Underneath all that shine she saw defeat in the stalk of his neck and the curious tight way he held his shoulders" (36). On the other hand, because female characters are comparatively powerful and definitive, the deweys predominantly represent women's Dostoevskian free will in a world in which assertive action, even when in reaction to male-imposed burdens, is a feminine sphere. If the deweys were girls, they would be actors, not impetuses or ideas. As boys, they convey the air of dissatisfaction that haunts their town, throwing into stark relief the heroines' bustling activity. In addition, the deweys' childlike physiques distinguish them from physically developed male characters that objectify the maternal or eroticized female body, thereby reinforcing their representation of a power more driven by the mind than the senses. The underdeveloped deweys playact the consequences playing in the minds of the Peace women before they create the act of destruction, and act only once these heroines have set their decisions in motion. Accordingly, the deweys dramatize women's foreknowledge as a tool and manifestation of their flagrant dismissal of predetermined feminine victimhood—a victimhood challenged by the self-harm that redefines and even negates the boundaries of women's agency.

Both male and female characters in *Sula* engage in self-sabotage that emanates from personal as well as social causes. However, the novel is primarily neither a critique of patriarchal betrayal of women amid

the oppressive backdrop of early twentieth-century American racial segregation, nor a reflection of the universality of self-violation as a symptom of the biblical Fall, though both of these threads shape the narrative. Rather, through her fascinating stylized depiction of the deweys, Morrison delineates the ways her heroines, rather than escaping or imploding like male characters, hurl themselves with misdirected but courageous abandon into their chosen personae among the few available female parts. They assume varying extremes of traditional and nontraditional female roles as mothers, wives, and “easy” women (122). The insistence with which the characters pursue these roles precisely because they promise agency underscores the need for personal definition in a community that refuses to see women as complicated selves. As Hortense Spillers explains, the resulting narrative “inscribes a new dimension of being [that moves] at last in contradistinction to the tide of virtue and pathos which tends to overwhelm black female characterization in a monolith of terms and possibilities” (1983, 293).

Without the marginal commentary offered by the actions of the deweys, *Sula* would lack the suspense delivered by the deweys’ foreshadowing and reification of women’s responses to the challenges of striving for bodily autonomy and social equality. As the physical manifestation of women’s decisions, they are in some ways metaphors for what J. L. Austin might call performative sentences, utterances that are actions unto themselves (1975, 6). To tell oneself to do something is, in the Peace household, to do the thing. These women acknowledge no viable alternative choices or futures once they have determined on an injurious course of action. Morrison invites readers to follow her heroines’ quests for selfhood as demarcated by the deweys and to discover, as the heroines do, the essentiality of female community to the wholeness of individual women and of the larger social fabric they weave. By the novel’s end, the reader must determine which message preponderates: a poignant judgment against a misogynistic society, whose oppression of women is so devastating that they direct their potentiality against themselves, or a celebration of the resilience of female friendship—despite women’s alienation from each other and themselves—even in the face of death.

Performing prophecies of the heroines forcing fate, the deweys appear in most of the novel’s major scenes. Their designation is capitalized only when matriarch Eva, whose name connotes Eve and a woman-provoked fall, nonetheless engages in the Adamic act of naming each boy—“Well. Look at Dewey. My my mymymy” (37)—and when they enter school: “Somebody said, ‘But, Miss Eva, you calls the other one Dewey.’ ‘So? This here’s another one’” (37). Their collective designation is never subsequently capitalized in the novel. It is by repeatedly referring to all three boys as one lower-cased entity that Morrison generates the almost mystical, Trinitarian communion among the children. The women characters both seek and obstruct this communion within their would-be sorority. At first, the collective deweys seem innocently mischievous: they tie shoelaces together, dance in the street, and sneak into the homes of other townspeople. Perhaps because of their gender, the boys are not burdened with the expectation of social graces. They are raucous and dismissive of social taboos. However, their perpetual laughter, games, and secrets always become most prevalent during times of adult stress and horror. One *Sula* critic remarks that “psychic traumas are literally written [onto] bodies that are physically marked in some way, whether by birthmark, self-mutilation, or through the process of violent death” (Burrows 2004, 120). The deweys interact most with the women who exemplify these respective forms of “marking”—Sula, Eva, and Hannah Peace—by imitating their traumas.

A fantastical femininity is at the heart of *Sula*, one which both kills and creates, and which seems to rely on a female community that it concurrently builds and severs, as the deweys foretell from the fringe of their matriarchal family circle. The first few chapters revolve around the developing relationship between the two girls; each is the “female double” (Duvall 2000, 54) of the other. Even though they are almost opposites

in personality, they begin to cling to one another and become closely associated in their community, like a pair of deweys. Their town, the Bottom, is void of agricultural life, but lush with an embodied adult pain that "rest[s] somewhere under the eyelids ... somewhere in the sinew's curve" (4). The pain quickly evolves into an overwhelming desire to control fate, a communal desire that finds its symbolic outlet in the fierce assertiveness of the town's most self-mutilating yet self-assured women, who offer more chaos than "Peace" to their community. Even as adolescents, Sula and her best friend are not immune to the influence of this negative force. Thrown into each other's confidence by a shared lack of father figures, Sula and Nel grow up in a maternal world. Whereas Nel's controlling mother raises her alone in an "incredibly orderly house" (51) from which her father seems forever absent, Sula lives in the lively matriarchate of a grandmother who adopts a large community of young couples, visiting cousins, a white alcoholic, and neglected children.

Eva embraces the role of matriarch over her domestic domain but practices a utilitarian and emotionally distant mothering toward her ever-expanding family. The narrator describes Eva's adoption of three boys in the paragraph following the depiction of BoyBoy's visit and Eva's response to it, as if to connect these decade-apart events in her consciousness—the failed husband and father with an enlarged, reactive maternity that subsumes the masculine-coded role of family provider. Eva's independent matriarchy frustrates limiting societal perceptions of black motherhood. Like her female offspring, Eva embodies a "[w]omanhood [that is] defined differently from the definitions supported by the white Western world, broadening the traditional conception of women's roles" in the American landscape (Hoffarth-Zelloe 1992, 115). The deweys, linked as they are to women's willful self-harm, signal the personal damage—both physical and mental—that Eva, Hannah, and Sula endure in order to subvert their preassigned scripts. After the first appearance of the boys, fatal events begin to proliferate in the Peace family. Mysteriously, the deweys seem to foresee many of these happenings and, by mirroring the self-destruction of their elders, they physically act out the future consequences of adult actions. The mischievous triad appears before nearly every catastrophe in the novel, including the deaths of Eva's adult children still living at home, Plum and Hannah, and her granddaughter, Sula, as well as the mass drowning of Bottom inhabitants. The deweys' emulation of female inner turbulence serves as the central catalyst for the novel's crises.

A conflicted but powerful matriarch, Eva (Eve) symbolically both adopts all humanity and crushes it with her aggressive nurturance. She endeavors to embrace people of different genders, races, and ages in the labyrinthine mother-world of her house, but she kills her addict son, and her daughter and granddaughter ultimately annihilate themselves. She seems able to nurture successfully only permanently juvenile males who have been emasculated by stunted growth and parental abandonment, but neither they nor her biological children survive to old age. Eva hopes to offer the deweys better lives. All of them are more or less orphaned, and all appear to be of different racial backgrounds. The first dewey is black but jaundiced, the second light-skinned and red-haired, and the third "half Mexican" (38), with the other half unspecified. The deweys become part of a similarly complicated arrangement in their new Ohio home: the Peace family includes the racially diverse trio in their predominantly black household, but the deweys' inseparability eventually leads to societal confusion over their racial identification. The deweys' ages likewise vary from four to seven years when they pass through Eva's door, but she sends them all to school together to attend the same class. She overrules the school's resistance to this with a tenacity and strategic foresight that are consistent with the extreme survival tactics she employed to save Plum from a nearly deadly constipation as a baby and to save all her children from starvation in the brutal aftermath of her husband's abandonment.

Eva "create[s] the deweys, rescuing them from potentially worse fates but denying them full identity" (Page 1995, 71), which calls into question her inclusivity as a formalized erasure of difference, though of a

difference the boys choose to nullify as well. Moreover, her disregard for the deweys' ages, races, and pasts emphasizes their symbolic function in the novel. She redefines them in a way that manifests her fiercely protective but parasitically controlling mothering, thus framing their role as mirrors both of her and her female descendants' unleashing of an inner aggressor that inevitably turns on them. Gurleen Grewal writes that Eva's desire to adopt and redefine the boys is evidence of her need "to control the threat of chaos" by ensuring "they remain infantile and at her mercy" (1998, 51). The limitations Eva inscribes for the deweys also recall the way women in the Bottom, like the maturing Sula and Nel, can be reduced to "pig meat" (50) when they walk past surveilling males. This is not to say that Eva sexualizes the deweys but that she refashions them into a cumulative commodity, a group of limbs whose identities are conflated in order to fulfill another's fantasies. Eva's parenting choices paint a thin veneer of egalitarianism over an insatiable drive to construct a predictable and socially approved motherhood, but those choices also point to her need to reconcile female nurturance with a feminine agency stereotypically associated with stunting male growth and power. In trying to develop a unified maternal self—she is, undoubtedly, both strong *and* feminine, controlling *and* nurturing—she tragically sabotages her children. Jennifer E. Henton notes the way Sula's protective self-mutilation later "voids the social contract" that supposes objectified black women have no agency and will acquiesce to abuse out of self-preservation (2012, 103). Like her granddaughter, Eva harms herself, physically and emotionally, in order to construct the type of family that will allow her to preserve a cohesive self-concept.

Just as the deweys' ages vary by a span of three years, major disasters occur in the Bottom in the three years after the deweys arrive, sealing their apocalyptic symbolism as a twisted trinity that demarcates the Peace women's chosen fates. These horrors—Eva's grotesque murder of Plum and Hannah's fiery death—both involve the deweys. Plum's murder, though dramatic, is portrayed as a private, relatively peaceful death (at least for Plum), and is subtly framed by the presence of the deweys. Hannah's arguably suicidal consumption by flames, in contrast, occurs as a public spectacle mimed by the deweys in front of the entire family.

Although Eva has poured more nurturing energy into Plum than into her female offspring, she directly terminates the life of only her son, as if to foreclose the paradigm of male parasitism that she fed in doting upon her male heir. He "had floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war" (45). Plum's combat experiences stoke a drug dependency that unravels his ability to care for himself. He returns home addicted to numbing narcotics and dumps all his dependencies upon Eva's crammed household, while his sullen mood, kleptomaniacal habits, and childish mannerisms drive Eva to despair. As her motherly hopes for Plum vanish, Eva adopts each of the three boys and then euthanizes the son they seem intended to replace. To save the regressive Plum from a ghostly existence and herself from his need to "crawl back in [her] womb" (71), Eva rocks the psychological baby in his adult body one last time and then burns him on a live funeral pyre, as if ritually terminating her own self-compromising maternal sacrificiality: "I held him real close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy" (72). After surviving dire impoverishment as a single mother in "a community in which the desires of black women are seldom realized" (Butler-Evans 1989, 61) and weathering her children's draining physical and emotional demands, Eva expresses through her murder of Plum her cumulative animosity towards the neediness of the children whose care necessitated so much self-sacrifice. The self-sufficiency of her alternative male children markedly contrasts with Plum's invalidism. She constructs for the deweys an autonomous triplet community and they become "inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves" (Morrison 1982, 38). Thus, they manifest Eva's longing to fulfill her maternal side without completely abandoning her own desires, and because they

represent a microcosmic inclusivity in their ambiguity of race and age, Eva can assume her identification with Eve as mother of the world.

Eva's motherly energies can excuse dependence in neither grown men nor the needy children of her embittered maternal past. Her replacement of boy-men like BoyBoy and Plum with self-reliant juveniles signals her refusal of further self-amputation, particularly for the sake of derelict males. However, ironically, the deweys showcase Eva's own threat to her wholeness. Exhausted by the emotional demands of an all-involving maternity, Eva strives to revise her role into that of a kind of clockmaker deity who observes her household realm from above. The traumatic difficulty of this shift is emblemized by the way in which, after igniting the helpless Plum, "she shut[s] the door and [makes] her slow painful journey back to the top of the house" (48), ostensibly struggling to deny her maternal failure and to reestablish herself in her imagined tower of matriarchal transcendence. The drugged Plum is portrayed as returning to a fetal state and does not seem to suffer while being devoured by Eva's flames, as if the narrative has here assumed Eva's wishful view of her homicidal maternal love.

As neighbors awaken to the violence of the roaring fire, the resounding cries of the deweys can be heard throughout the house—though no one else in the house seems to know that there is anything to fear until Hannah discovers the blaze (48). The deweys are among the first to respond when the fire is lit, apparently aware of the personal awakening that has propelled Eva's "infanticide" of Plum. Their shouts serve as a warning to the family of Plum's current conflagration and of the future fire that will consume Hannah, and they also dramatize the perilous Peace women's already anticipated regrets. While Plum burns, the deweys' cries follow Hannah as she runs out of the house to assist neighbors in bringing water to douse the flames, figuratively pooling her and Eva's tears, which are impotent to quench the women's destructive compulsions. Thus, in the next few pages, Hannah will present herself to the neighbors once again, but as a vehicle for unmitigated self-destruction.

Following Plum's extermination, Hannah deliberately risks emotional incineration by her volatile mother when she decides to question Eva about her childhood. The answer leads to the physical burning that symbolizes Hannah's pointed psychological self-ignition. While sitting on the floor stripping beans with forced calm, she asks, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (67), implying an all-encompassing criticism of Eva's mothering. Eva orders the deweys, who are playing chain gang near the window, to leave the room. She replies to Hannah's challenge by spitting, "You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't" (68). Eva driving out the deweys before replying leaves the reader to wonder if she subconsciously senses a connection between their reenactment of slavery and Eva's forced, lethal bond with Hannah, a child she had had "no time or energy to love" (Page 1995, 71). This ejection of the deweys also insinuates an attempt to suppress her aggressive impulses so she can respond to her daughter without the violence of outrage. Not satisfied with such primitive evidence of her mother's affection as her physical survival, Hannah dares to prod Eva further by asking why Eva had never played with her and her siblings when they were children. Eva again scoffs at her daughter. In a final attempt to bridge the gap between herself and her mother, Hannah inquires as to why Eva killed Plum, the child she seemed to privilege with the most love. Eva explains: "I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again. (...) I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all crunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (71–72). Eva implies that the attempt to "rebirth" her adult son would have killed her—that she incinerated him to preserve herself as well as to burn away his over-dependence on feminine nurturance, a concept often bound to water imagery. Instead of using water, she doused him with diesel and lit what she justifies as a restorative fire that redeemed his masculinity, though

it killed him. She invests effort in creating a womb-like space outside of herself in which she claims the fetal Plum is reborn in death “like a man,” emphasizing both her commitment to nurturing male children in extremity and her powerful capacity to transform a subject into its negative definition (much as her Adamic naming of the deweys makes three individuals one, unified whole). Conversely to her apparent over-mothering and then homicide of Plum, Eva denies Hannah sufficient nurturance (as she does herself), thereby driving her daughter to self-incineration, yet she also nearly kills herself in a later, unsuccessful effort to save Hannah. The matriarch’s conflicted maternal persona exacerbates her inward self-division and her division from her children. After provoking repeated rebuffs and witnessing Eva’s preoccupation with Plum’s memory as she “continue[s] to call his name” (72), Hannah responds by shuffling to the kitchen to rinse her pot of Kentucky Wonders, “swirl[ing] them” tenderly in the water, “pour[ing] the water off and repeat[ing] the process” (72) as if in silent rebellion against the fire set by her mother and its abortive consequences. Hannah’s repetitive gestures also convey her subconscious endeavor to generate for herself the submersion in feminine nurturance she so craves: “Each time the green tubes rose to the surface she felt elated and collected whole handfuls at a time to drop in twos and threes back into the water” (72). The image of pairs and triplets of embryo-like beans immersed in a yonic bowl of amniotic fluid suggests Hannah’s playful, symbolic enactment of maternal generation as she tries to comfort and mother herself. It also subtly alludes to the Sula-Nel duo and dewey trio that compensate for actual or emotional orphanhood through alternative bonds. These bonds are tenuous, however, as evidenced when underfed child-woman Hannah puts the beans on the fire and they boil and disperse.

Before she sets the pot on the fire, Hannah looks “[t]hrough the window over the sink” and sees “the deweys still playing chain gang; their ankles bound one to the other, they tumbled, struggled back to their feet and tried to walk single file. Hens strutted by with one suspicious eye on the deweys, another on the brick fireplace where sheets and mason jars were boiled. Only the deweys could play in this heat” (72–73). Hannah’s thoughts churn in the aftermath of her mother’s rejection, and the deweys churn like the boiling Kentucky Wonders. The deweys’ imperviousness to the weather reflects the unstoppable nature of Hannah’s approaching self-immolation as she watches them gambol outside. The (female-identified) hens’ united “eye” reinforces the deweys’ emblematic role as enactors for female characters of the effects of their self-harm. Hannah watches the hens watch the deweys as she does, and as Eva will soon watch Sula watch Hannah burn. The collective female surveillance of female destructiveness reflects the women’s sense of a united pattern of disaster-making. They look on the deweys and each other with a “suspicious eye” of self-recognition, a shared conviction that they will inevitably choose to alienate each other and destroy themselves, like a chain gang of entangled, stumbling, never fully actualized deweys.

The next day, Hannah serves Eva eggs (a continuation of the hen reference), and the house erupts in chaos because the deweys refuse the bath that Sula insists on giving them. They go “wild at the thought of water” (74), perhaps implying that the self-destructiveness Hannah has shown in provoking Eva will never be quenched. Sula chases the boys all around the house, trying to wash them clean—as if indirectly trying to save her mother from herself—but to no avail. During this wild fiasco, Hannah sedately washes the family’s firesafe mason jars. The deweys, like Hannah, have fire on their mind, but Hannah “ignore[s] them” and the warning message they convey of her pending demise (74). Instead, she continues to wash fireproof mason jars that will never need putting out, while neglecting to dampen down the burning pain within herself that she fanned into flame by demanding from her mother a healing tenderness that she knows Eva can never provide. Hannah, in turn, will deny the water-chasing Sula the female nurture for which she thirsts.

Whether with conscious or unconscious intent, Hannah sets her own dress ablaze after she assumes she has severed the last, tenuous tie between herself and her mother. This assumption is immediately proven false when Eva, seeing her daughter aflame in the yard, jumps out of the second-story window and tries to crawl toward Hannah, impulsively contradicting her previous attempts to exercise the more detached maternal authority demonstrated by her incineration of Plum. Eva's palliative heroic attempts are in vain, and Hannah soon collapses as an agonized, deformed mass of burnt flesh. Thus, mother and daughter collaboratively murder their love. The deweys involve themselves in this scene more than in any other. Their precarious game of chain gang has already caused them to fall over one another, as if rehearsing Hannah's wild flame dance. When the neighbors toss a tub of water at Hannah to put out the flames, the futility of their effort to save her resembles Sula's futile attempt to bathe the deweys; the steam "sear[s] to sealing" (76) her doom instead of washing it away. After Hannah's passing, the deweys crowd around the smoldering body, "their eyes raked with wonder" (76), like the coals from the fire of Hannah's insistent self-conflagration. The boys are not frightened of the body, nor do they seem confused. They are interested in the death they had foretold by their actions, but are not appalled by it like the neighbors. This unnatural reaction attests to the otherworldliness of the deweys and to their supernatural ability to playact the willful fragmentation of their matriarchal family. Their response also recalls Nel's passive observation of Chicken Little's drowning: it is a moment when "[d]eath by fire, or death by water, merge and become simple pleasure" (Henton 2012, 105). This horrific "simple pleasure," a combination of masculine-coded fire and feminine-coded water, represents the Peace women's striving to consolidate power and nurturance in themselves, in defiance of the "social contract" that demands their conformity to one-dimensional feminine roles. In order to combat victimization, the Peace women harm themselves before others get the chance, and it is this pattern of self-harm that allows a reading of Hannah's immolation as a suicide instead of a tragic accident. Hannah burns herself before Eva can deem her too needy, like Plum; her immolation is an agentic protest against Eva's parasitic mothering, an ironic form of self-protection that emits her similar desire for love and control.

Just as one-legged Eva models self-mutilation to Hannah, who annihilates not only a limb but her entire body, Sula imitates and transmutes this impulse of both by making an art of her self-destructive life. The deweys play an important role as signposts of her ultimately fatal choices. Just as Eva refuses Hannah a personal love, Hannah declares to her girlfriends her dislike of her own daughter: "I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference" (57). Sula hears this rebuff but not its softening context in Hannah's follow-up explanation to her friends: "She only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window ... aware of a sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight" (57). Sula gazes out a window after her mother's rejection, as Hannah had done. A kind of emotional paralysis accompanies the daughters' denial by their mothers, yet they reproduce their fragmented family relationships by fragmenting their female friendships instead of carefully preserving them as the only form of community likely to persist.

The adult Sula becomes sexually promiscuous to feed herself emotionally as her mother had done, thereby alienating the women whose men she seduces. She uses and dismisses the men as she felt dismissed by her mother, and assumes an emotional detachment that belies her unresolved paternal as well as maternal loss. All the Peace women relate more to men than to women, even though their own men always leave them, but they abandon themselves when they abandon other women. Sula's repeated harassment of the deweys not only signifies a Freudian aggression toward her absent father and distant mother but, more profoundly, mimics and foreshadows her calculated aggression against herself. Whereas Eva had engaged in a conflicted megamaternal empire-building while cultivating platonic flirtations with male companions, and Hannah

had pursued a combination of casual sex and maternal domesticity (through cooking, cleaning, and her detached duty to Sula), Sula rejects motherhood entirely, seeking the masculine privilege of a promiscuity devoid of responsibility. Sula's estrangement from her family (and from the scandalized population of the Bottom) repositions her as a character who, as Spillers says, "exists foremost in her own consciousness" (1983, 295). Sula's bold self-definition engenders a driving force against which the citizens of the Bottom can negatively define themselves. Her chaos inspires an "increase of energy and virtue" in the town, and this energy and virtue dissipate upon her death (Stein 1984, 149). Sula's determination to live by her own rules seems to imply an agency that testifies to her success living as a holistically complex woman; nevertheless, when Sula's actions separate her from Nel, who serves as an inalienable piece of Sula, it becomes clear that Sula cannot survive as an assured but self-isolated experimentalist.

As a girl, Sula expressed a loyalty and mutuality toward her best friend Nel that is epitomized in Sula's grotesque act of slicing off part of her finger to preempt the intended violence of a gang of Irish boys who threaten the two girls. This deed subtly recurs in Sula's adolescent act of chasing the deweys in the attempt to bathe them. They are terrified of the vulnerability and sloughing off of self signified by the threatened bath. If the deweys' function for Sula is to enact the inevitable consequences of her chosen self-destruction, then she will chase her inner demons through the labyrinthine house of her mind in vain and allow them to escape unquenched, and Eva abets her in this.

When Sula and Nel graduate from high school, Sula enthusiastically helps to plan Nel's wedding to Jude, but the deweys' attendance of the event hints at her ultimate demolition of the marriage and accompanying loss of her best friend and second self. Significantly, it is at Nel and Jude's ill-fated wedding that the town "realize[s] for the first time that except for their magnificent teeth, the deweys [will] never grow" (84). The deweys are seen as young boys "frozen in a state of perpetual, irresponsible childhood" (Dubey 1994, 52), an equally fitting description for the adult Sula as she attempts to assume a male-identified egotistic liberty that eschews all obligation. She opts for promiscuity over exclusivity, leaving Medallion for ten years and roaming through relationships as she roams through cities. Sula chooses to remain in a paradoxical stasis of experimentalism, while her counterpart in Nel retains her stasis of self-repressive pragmatism. Both are attempts at wholeness that instead produce personal incompleteness and thwart relationality.

On Sula's return to Medallion, Nel casually inquires about the deweys shortly before Sula betrays her by sleeping with Jude, as if invoking her friend's and her own destruction:

"Who's feeding the deweys and Tar Baby? You?"

"Sure me. Anyway Tar Baby don't eat and the deweys still crazy."

"I heard one of 'em's mamma came to take him back but didn't know which was hern."

"Don't nobody know." (100)

Sula carelessly claims to be feeding the deweys and implies that it is easy because they are "still crazy," which implies on a literal level that she does not feed them, and on a symbolic level that she effortlessly feeds her wild, immature impulses wherever they lead, regardless of the consequences they foreshadow to her. No woman can distinguish the deweys because all women are mother to them, as they are mother to their own tragic destinies, and no woman succeeds in "tak[ing] back" or fully recognizing and owning her role as self-saboteur. Nel smugly reflects that Sula's poor choices show how "like always, [she is] incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions" (101), but Nel has also chosen unwisely in that she has lost

herself by following a scripted path of (ex-)wife and mother that Sula encapsulates as a "secondhand lonely" (143).

After the exchange concerning the deweys, Sula admits to Nel that she institutionalized Eva; her rejection of her grandmother's authority and refusal to care for her is a violation of the matrilineal African American culture of caretaking and an ultimately self-alienating betrayal of her "motherline" (O'Reilly 2004, 62–63). Sula justifies placing Eva in a home by claiming to fear Eva would burn her alive as she did Plum. In fact, upon Sula's return to the Bottom, she had vehemently declared, in response to Eva's unwelcoming criticisms, "Any more fires in this house, I'm lighting them!" (93). Sula checkmates Eva's aggression with a more socially acceptable version of her own, locking Eva out of the Peace house instead of locking herself in, and unconsciously does the same thing to Nel. When Nel catches Sula having intercourse with Jude, Nel is immediately "locked into a visual symbol of alienated lonely despair" (Rice 2000, 172). She feels abandoned by both her husband and her best friend, and mentally separates from Sula for the first time. Before the deweys, the girls were almost one person, sharing mind and consciousness. When their bond shatters, Sula becomes the town's "easy" and uses sex as a way to "find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow" (122). Throughout the remainder of the book, Sula and Nel search for something to fill the gap left by the absence of the other. However, neither realizes how much they miss each other until Sula's tragic end. Sula's childish personality has not changed, but her concept of adult freedom alienates the women closest to her, especially her best friend, which ultimately alienates Sula from herself.

In trying to use sex to fill the void left by Nel, Sula asserts power and self-protective detachment in the stereotyped male-identified way she uses her partners, sleeping "with men as frequently as she could" (122) and then "trying to recall [their] name[s]" (123) afterward while communing with herself. However, she fails to maintain this detachment with one of her lovers: "she had not counted on ... the beautiful black face that stared at her through the blue-glass window. Ajax" (124). In becoming increasingly attached to the handsome, companionable Ajax, Sula experiences Nel's perspective firsthand: she feels the nest-making instinct, the possessiveness of her beloved, and the acute sense of loss when he abandons her. As before, Sula could have avoided this form of suffering if she had heeded the warning of the deweys, and the experience fails to increase her empathy for Nel or other women in her life.

The deweys appear precisely before Sula makes love to Ajax. While she waits for Ajax to emerge from the bath, the deweys run unabashedly into Sula's bedroom: "She was smiling, thinking how like Jude's was his craving to do the white man's work, when two deweys came in with their beautiful teeth and said, 'We sick'" (128). They claim they require medicine and they want money to buy "the catarrh remedy" (129) they relish from the drugstore. When Sula grabs a shoe and playfully hurls it at the boys to get rid of them, they scream and curse. In retaliation, Sula "leaped out of the bed naked as a yard dog. She caught the redheaded dewey by his shirt and held him by the heels over the banister until he wet his pants" (129). The other two deweys immediately retrieve stones from their pockets and begin to pelt Sula as she "carrie[s] the wet dewey to the bedroom" and dumps him onto the bed, followed by the other two (129). By dangling a dewey over the banister, Sula reveals the precariousness of the predicament in which she has placed herself. Prior to this encounter, Sula boasted an ingenerate independence, but she surrenders her autonomy in order to make love to Ajax, whose very name conjures up images of war and the idea of the body as a battleground in itself. By loving Ajax, Sula submits to him in a way that she has never before submitted to a man, allowing the just-bathed warrior's wetness to quench her fiery spirit. The fire symbolism alive in the red hair of the dewey dumped on the bed echoes the flaming deaths of Plum and Sula's mother Hannah, and the deweys' warning of her demise becomes clear: if Sula gives herself fully to Ajax, she, too, will be consumed. Sula

seems to know that she is proverbially playing with fire by choosing to torment the redheaded dewey, but she shrugs off the warning and soldiers into bed with Ajax anyway.

It is during intercourse that Sula feels the impulse to make Ajax her permanent lover. For the first time in her life, she wants to keep a man with her, to enslave him to her passions and use him as a means to “construct [her own] identity” (Duvall 2000, 55). The sex act inspires only violent impulses in Sula: while she gazes at Ajax, she imagines chiseling into his face in an attempt to reach deeper into his being. Sula wants to carve away the psychic distance between Ajax and herself, though she will be hurt by the stony interior of Ajax’s self. This desire is pantomimed beforehand by the stone-throwing deweys, who mirror the masochist within Sula that she fails to suppress or to bribe away. Ajax’s oedipal attraction to Sula for the free-spirited cleverness that evokes his mother evaporates when he senses a lover’s possessiveness in her that inhibits rather than feeds his creative self-expression. He extricates himself from the relationship as soon as Sula tries to mold him into the permanent vessel for her self-identification. In changing her character to retain her lover, she loses him.

Similar to the deweys, Sula now has no identity, not even codependently Ajax’s identity, which is revealed by his birth name on his license and introduces another part of Ajax—A. Jacks—that she can never know. In light of the fact that, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Jack” signifies “John Doe” in American (and British) parlance, and that Morrison uses it in plural form, this name revelation exposes to Sula and the reader her delusion in mistaking a sexually dominating everyman for a Trojan war hero, who himself represents the glorification of the masterful male killer. In her attempted possession of a man, Sula becomes the one possessed, her body climactically conquered on the gender battlefield with her chosen warrior, who turns out to be no more than another manifestation of all the men in which her self-flagellating subconscious has led her to lose herself. In other words, Sula’s subconscious functions as the Trojan horse, the vehicle that allows Ajax’s invasion of her selfhood. When her “sense of stability of both Ajax’s and her own identity dissolves” (Duvall 2000, 62), Sula discovers that the only constant, stable element in her life is now the malevolence of the Bottom. No one in her town will talk to her or take care of her when she becomes seriously ill except the deweys, one other boy, and Tar Baby, himself an outcast and perpetual child. Spillers argues that Sula’s “unalterable ‘badness’” manifests a woman in whom “black and female are now made to appear as a *single* subject” (1983, 295). While this is certainly true, Sula’s seemingly fatal submission to Ajax and her untimely death raise questions concerning the efficacy of Sula’s previous attempts to situate herself as an agentic being in control of her own actualization and selfhood. Her death scene decries the body divided, establishing the separation of Sula’s spirit and body as well as a severance from Nel, with whom she had once shared a collaborative consciousness.

When Nel finally visits Sula once before her death and offers help, it has been three years since the Jude affair and the disaffected women’s last interaction. Sula asks Nel to pick up a prescription, which the narrator informs us “the doctor said not to take until the pain got really bad” (140), insinuating that it has serious and potentially deadly side effects. Nel pays for and brings the dangerous syrup to Sula, who imbibes it from a “sticky spoon” (141) in a situation reminiscent of Sula’s paying for the deweys’ desired “medicine”; this parallel shows that both women enable Sula’s self-sabotage as she had enabled the deweys’ imagined illness. The two then argue about their divergent characters, life choices, the Jude incident, men, and “who was good” (146) between them, and none of these issues is resolved—“Talking to [Sula] about right and wrong was like talking to the deweys” (145). Nel gives up arguing with her former friend and gives her the last word at parting. The narrator specifies that “[w]hen Nel closed the door, Sula reached for more medicine,” bemoaning that Nel will remember her only for the pain she caused “and never remember the

days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price" (147). In their argument, Sula rejects Nel as she perceives Nel to have rejected her, and when Sula realizes the predictable outcome—her thwarting of any possible reconciliation between them—she commits suicide, or at least accelerates her death. Facing her imminent demise, she lingers nostalgically over the idea of her and Nel's former oneness, signified by the "one eye" that again alludes to the hens' collective gaze on the deweys the day before Hannah's death—the haunting emblem of women's universal journey toward open-eyed suicide, whether they take the short way or the long way there.

Though Sula's body is not literally aflame when she dies, her fever links her death to the fiery deaths of Plum and Hannah and, in effect, to the fire symbolism linked to the deweys throughout the novel. However, Sula's journey to the afterlife becomes a progression through tunnels where she encounters a "rain scent" and a body of water that allows her to "curl into heavy softness," into a "sleep of water always" (149). The peace her spirit finds in this liquid, labyrinthine nowhere prefigures both the death of many Bottom citizens in a collapsed tunnel and the hope for a figurative, communal rebirth following tragedy. It is during the baptismal mass drowning in the collapsed tunnel that the deweys and their emblematic function as the enactors of women's inevitable self-dissolution are finally quenched, one year after Sula's death.

Shadrack, an eccentric war veteran, had instituted National Suicide Day years before, a day when everyone could fear and expect death in order to "get it out of the way" (14). Every year, on the third day of January, Shadrack trudges through town, ringing a bell and swinging a hangman's rope. He announces the purpose of National Suicide Day to everyone, "telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other" (14). Shadrack offers this event to the Bottom as "a necessary buffer against the onslaught of [chaos]" (Montgomery 1979, 130). Normally, few citizens ever leave their houses to join his annual one-man parade, but in 1941, the people have endured a long, exhausting winter, and the sight of Shadrack ironically makes them remember and rejoice in life. The people swarm out of their door frames, following Shadrack in a whooping, swirling line of happy men and women.

The deweys are among the first to celebrate in the human chain. Here, the image of a chain of people, coupled with the image of the deweys' previous chain gang game before Hannah's suicide, gives the observant reader a surprising foresight. The deweys, reflecting the self-destruction of not only the women but the entire community of the Bottom, are actually escorting the symbolically enslaved citizens to their deaths. The crowd moves past the town and onto the resonant "New River Road" adjacent to the abandoned tunnel excavation project where black citizens were not allowed to work years before. They had been promised an income and a new life by means of this tunnel, but the white community had opted, instead, to find other workers for the project. As one body, the parade seeks vengeance for "[t]he teeth unrepaired ... the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers" (161). The townspeople jump over the fence and run to destroy what is left of the tunnel, smashing everything in sight with makeshift weapons. It is as if the people are collectively wreaking their revenge on this yonic symbol, both for a racist society's withholding of nurturance and, in the case of the women, for their lack of self-nurturance as well. However, these warranted "expressions of black rage at the social and economic injustices of life ultimately prove self-destructive" (Bouson 2000, 49).

Suddenly, a few people decide to traverse the unfinished tunnel. They had not planned to go inside, but in their urgency to obliterate even the memory of injustice, they wrack the innards of the tunnel. This communal action invokes Plum's futile attempt "to crawl back in [Eva's] womb" (71), a desperate quest for a never-attained nurture. The indignant violence of the townspeople is justified, but the tunnel collapses, and dozens of people are crushed under the mountain's enormous weight. Parallel to Plum's thwarted attempt

at regression to an embryonic state in an unaccommodating womb, the entire town is denied rebirth by the death-dealing compression of an artificial birth canal, a disembodied feminine symbol that emblemizes the whole community's lack of nurture in the larger society they occupy. Hence, "National Suicide Day fulfills the prophecy of its name" (Galehouse 1999, 5).

Strangely, the deweys, who are still in the front of the parade when it arrives at the tunnel, are never discovered (Morrison 1982, 162). Most of the surviving residents assume that they died during the thunderous cave-in, and no one bothers to investigate the matter any further; their bodies simply fail to surface. Accounts of the tragedy differ over who "had been the first to go": "Most folks said it was the deweys, but one or two knew better, knew that Dessie and Ivy had been first" (158). The women and the deweys are almost interchangeable here, since the deweys symbolically function to enact human compulsions. These compulsions (deweys) can lie buried but never die, which suggests that women's fragmentation of self and female community both reflects and contributes to the downfall of all human community. Dessie and Ivy, local everywomen of whom we know very little, lead the plunge into death in the surrogate birth canal, as if to complete on a communal scale the demolition instigated by Eva, Hannah, Sula, and Nel. The two more anonymous characters accentuate the novel's pervasive depiction of African American women's capacity for utter deconstruction of self and society in a way that blurs the distinctions between homicide and suicide and that also crosses the boundaries of age, race, and gender, just like the deweys.

The only other significant reference to the deweys in the novel after the mass drowning occurs during Nel's reflection upon the town almost twenty-four years later. She ponders the new world, and compares modern thoughts to old ideas. Surprisingly, she finds that present and past do not differ much in content. In fact, "the young people had a look about them that everybody said was new but which reminded Nel of the deweys" (163). This look is explained by the fact that both the deweys and the new youth "embody a 'plural name'" (Dubey 1994, 61). The new youth are one with the spirit of the deweys. Even though the deweys have vanished, their presence is still alive in the minds and hearts of the Bottom, reemphasizing humanity's never-ending potential to annihilate itself, regardless of time, opportunity, progress. It is as if this tendency pollutes the "cyclical" stream of human nature in every new generation, not just in the offspring of the Bottom (Griffin 1995, 46). At the end of the book there are new babies—new children will play the same game the deweys played, call each other names, and develop friendships. The memory of the deweys in the Bottom seems to imply that people remain infinitely more capable of self-destruction than self-construction. Even children must participate in the masochistic behavior modeled by the adults and their projections as embodied in the deweys. However, the persistence of the deweys' influence on the Bottom also hints at the enduring aftermath of self-destruction—an aftermath that, though distressing, introduces a new element to the cyclic repetitions of the town's history: a communal ability to declare and assert an agency birthed from women's suffering and concomitant self-rediscovery. Though the communal expression of a female-identified agency results in a (literal) collapse around many of the town's members, it proclaims the possibility of beneficial social change arising from women's ability to freely construct their own parameters for domestic and public life.

In *Sula*, who or what is blamed for the tragic foundation of this social change? Though not defined by it, the novel does portray the oppressive effects of white racism on the Bottom from its very beginning, along with the related evils of poverty, disempowerment, and despair, all of which are depicted as patriarchal evils. This is not to propose that racism and patriarchy are synonymous forces in the Bottom, but to emphasize how the Peace women are doubly othered in their community, where their deliberate insistence on exercising power can be expressed as only a self-destructive reclamation of bodily control.

This control defies both racist and patriarchal oppression by self-harming before one can be harmed more grievously by others. Morrison refuses to relegate *Sula*'s women to mere victimhood. There is sometimes an unmistakable strain of perversity in their assertion of free will that shows at once their humanity and their originality; despite these heroines' historical, regional, racial and gender particularity, they cannot be tidily typecast into conclusive ideological or moral critical narratives. The tunnel implosion that decimates the population of the Bottom, like the self-destruction practiced by the Peace women, becomes an expression of agentic self-harm writ large. It is, nonetheless, a hopeful conclusion that implies a community-wide affirmation of the desire to "[inscribe] a new dimension of being" (Spillers 1983, 293) that will permit all inhabitants of the Bottom to foster, foremost, agentic, unified selves. Tiffany N. Hinton views *Sula*'s hopeful "water figurations" as effecting the "restor[ation] to the African American collective memory" of "the Yoruba-derived water goddess" who "[animates] bodies of waters [and] is also known to 'awaken' human bodies, whether by mollifying individual psyches or flooding entire communities with her healing properties" (2017, 292, 294).

The indication of communal healing through feminine restoration inversely confirms the relationships between individual female and communal suffering, as in the ways in which Sula and Nel both inherit a "cycle of abandonment trauma" (Schreiber 2010, 88), which, in Sula's case, causes her "to protect herself by acting in aggressive ways" (89). Among the Peace women, each undernurtured mother visits her love hunger on her daughter in a dysfunctional pattern that fosters an unsympathetic disposition, even as all three women manifest a vital independence (Eckard 2002, 54–55). Aoi Mori also explains that newly industrialized cities of the early 1900s were antimaternal, contributing to the alienation of women and the breakdown of traditional African American community (1999, 104–105). By naming her chapters with chronological dates instead of titles, Morrison recounts a slow and unfinished progression towards a reclamation of individual freedom and communal solidarity. Thus, despite the fractured psyches and families that pervade *Sula*, there is an unmistakable glimmer of hope for redemption. As one Morrison critic observes, "Even in the midst of tragic death, implicit in this narrative structure is the idea of regeneration and renewal and self-identity" (Williams 2000, 113). The deweys and the narrative they occupy are not entirely bleak in their connotations. The deweys' vanishing in the waters of the Bottom's despair also portends baptismal healing and hope, evoking the miracle of birth-as-rebirth. Unlike Plum and the drowned citizens, the deweys achieve the unachievable—their disappearance signifies their acceptance by the birth canal and conferral of reentry into the womb through a tunnel that somehow transforms for them from a racist construct to an optimistic universal Mother, who symbolically reincarnates them in the next generation.

Nel remembers the deweys at a point when she is finally able to be emotionally and spiritually reconciled with Sula, when she recognizes them in the young people around her. She then goes to visit Eva, who declares that there was "[n]ever no difference between [Nel and Sula]" (169), before paying respects at Sula's grave in the cemetery where all the deceased Peace family members lie. In Nel's reclaimed dual identity as both Sula and herself, she embodies Sula's and all the Peace women's potential to reconcile with each other and with themselves. The deweys' disappearance into the quenching waters of the tunnel hints that their presence is no longer necessary in either the microcosmic world of Sula and Nel or the macrocosmic world for which their sisterly reunion presages a seemingly impossible unification. Nel hears Sula's spirit in the whispering trees and hears her own heart for the first time since childhood, stripped of pride and embracing her true loss—that of her kindred spirit: "'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl'" (174). The doubly triplicate repetition of girl (as three designations in a sequential list, and as three "girl"s within the last listed designation) replaces the triplicate deweys

with a prayer-like invocation for female reconciliation, for a return to the girlhood unity that radiates with the unconditional love, loyalty, and possibility for which all human beings long. The extent to which Nel's prayer can or will be answered remains ambiguous. Yet Morrison's novel suggests that through forgiveness, the self may achieve a unification that strengthens as it is strengthened by a genuine community in which everyone, including a powerful black woman, can thrive. This community does not yet exist and, as Eva, Hannah, Sula, and even Nel discover, its attainment may come at too high an individual cost.

That is not, however, the note on which the narrative concludes. Morrison ultimately silences the deweys, not the women represented by the sorrowing but rejuvenated and more authentic Nel. The deweys' deceptively boyish, anarchic skepticism gives way to a womanly union of "girls together" (174). This partial reimmersion in a shared childhood signals maturation rather than regression. The Nel-Sula bond of "girls" rejects the dangerous homogeneity of the deweys, instead equating unity with simultaneous individuation. Nel becomes more herself as she reunites with Sula's spirit, chanting "circles and circles of sorrow" (174) that point toward a female catholicity that transcends the mortal now. Despite the many agonies Sula's female characters suffer, the novel's concluding depiction of everywoman Nel's active mourning reunited to her past differentiates her from the "rootless" deweys "existing from day to day with no knowledge of past or future" (Harris 1999, 116). Nel's tears for Sula redeem Nel; her courageous authenticity and empathy for an other-as-self, even as it echoes the collective anguish of the novel's women, shows strength. Nel, like the Peace women, has begun to transform grief into power. The boundless circles of sorrow resound with a declaration of the agentic self.

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