FEMALE IDENTITY FORMATION:  
RELATIONSHIPS IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS  

by  

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTERS OF ARTS  
IN  
ENGLISH  

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA  

MAY 2016  

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Abstract

This thesis uses the multiplicative approach developed by Deborah King and Patricia Hill Collins to analyze female identity formation in Toni Morrison’s novels *Sula*, *Jazz* and *Beloved*. I focus on black women’s differential experiences and the female characters’ relationships with female friends, romantic partners, elders and ancestors. Female friendship is often formed through solidarity among female characters. Race plays an important role in the formation of this bond, although at times, class and gender inform the meaning of race. Through friendship, women overcome emotional pain. Without first accomplishing self-fulfillment, women are not able to enter successful romantic relationships, although in certain cases, race and class change the meaning of gender and a romantic partner plays a crucial role in a female character’s ability to overcome emotional trauma. Pivotal in female identity formation is also women’s relationships with their elders, who, through the process of “re-memoration,” connect the characters to their ancestors.
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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Dr. Dee Horne, not only for sharing her knowledge with me but also, for supporting me patiently and unwaveringly. I would also like to express my deep appreciation for my committee members, Dr. Maryna Romanets and Dr. Han Li for their direction, dedication, and invaluable advice along this project.

I am especially thankful to my parents, my grandparents and my husband for encouraging me and for helping me to see myself through my own eyes. Special thanks to Valbona Lavdari, Kris Ndrecka and Ofelia Ndrecka for their love and support. Finally, I am grateful to Lydia Porter, because conversations with her are like conversations with myself.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated with love to

My mother, Monika Banaj, for being my source of strength, comfort and belonging
My father, Kujtim Banaj, for believing in me even when I did not believe in myself
My grandmother, Lumturi Lavdari, for providing me with my ancestral DNA
My grandfather, Nazmi Lavdari, for being my first and most beloved teacher
My husband, Nathaniel Teegee, for being my friend, my inspiration, and my home
My daughter, Madeline Monika Banaj-Teegee. I have loved and waited for you all my life.

Thank you, now and always.
Introduction

In her novels *Sula* (1973), *Jazz* (1992) and *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison examines the important role that race and gender play in the lives of her female characters. More specifically, through her fictional characters, she demonstrates that this double marginalization has a negative effect in the women's ability to form successful relationships. In *The Voices of Toni Morrison*, Barbara Hill Rigney argues that there are no “whole truths” or “whole” women in Morrison’s fiction and that Morrison subverts traditional Western notions of identity and wholeness. bell hooks states that since black women are doubly marginalized by society for being female and black, they must rely on each other for support and live and work in solidarity (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* 43), to which hooks refers as sisterhood. She asserts that in order to live and work in solidarity, women must be honest with themselves and should not fear being vulnerable. Clenora Hudson-Weems discusses the importance of race in black women’s friendships and argues that double marginalization plays a significant role in the bond that forms genuine female friendship (*Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* 65). She stresses that the bond is reciprocal and women must give and receive equally in order to live harmoniously in a community of sisters (*Africana Womanism* 65). At the center is an emotional bond that is formed due to shared experiences, the foundation of which is that they are neither white nor male. As a result, their experience with gender discrimination and racism joins them emotionally. Acknowledging the importance of race in “Home” Morrison observes that she has “never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter” (3). Critics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Barbara Jeanne Fields argue that race cannot be explained biologically because it is only an ideology that is socially constructed in order to justify slavery and the exploitation of black
people in the U.S. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison demonstrates that race is a social construction that is used to disguise "forces, events, classes, and expression of social decay and economic division" (63). This systematic "othering" of black people, paired with gender discrimination, places black women in a unique, albeit disparaging, position. Thus it is not unexpected that black women refer to the bond among each other as sisterhood.

These concerns about "othering" not only due to racism but also due to gender are evident in Morrison’s fiction. Female agency, the ability of a woman to act for herself, the capacity of a woman to make the choice to act, is prevalent in her works. Julian Wolfreys, Kenneth Womack and Ruth Robbins define agency as “the ability to act on the world on one’s own behalf or the extent to which one is empowered to act by the various ideological frameworks within which one operates” (5). While they disagree on the importance of self-determination over circumstances, Judith Butler and Seyla Benhabib agree on the significance of female agency. Benhabib asserts that the capacity of subjects for self-reflection and self-determination is essential to personal agency (21). To overcome their struggles, hooks stresses that black women cannot afford to see themselves only as victims because their own survival depends on their ability to overcome their emotional pain (*Feminist Theory* 46). Thus an important part of a woman reclaiming her agency is recognizing the circumstances that made her surrender her agency and, with self-determination, overcoming them. The level of its success with relation to circumstances is another point of disagreement between Butler and Benhabib. Butler emphasizes the significant role that societal norms play in the formation of the subject (46), and thus, according to Benhabib, undercuts the importance of self-determination in comparison to cultural determination (21). hooks emphasizes that while victimization in black women
cannot be denied, it is essential that black women bond on the basis of shared strengths instead of weaknesses (Feminist Theory 46). According to her, it is only through shared strengths that black women can overcome victimization and this, in turn, forms the essence of female friendship (Feminist Theory 46). This bonding through strength resonates with Christa Albrecht-Crane’s point that laughter strengthens a female friendship’s bond, as the women “acknowledge that identity matters, but they push beyond its power to affirm a dynamic of belonging that defies identity” (66). Reclaiming of agency is an important step for a woman on her journey to self-actualization, which Abraham Maslow defines as “the phenomena of [emotional] maturation, of expression, and of growth” (30).

Reconfiguration of the self, what Morrison refers to in her introduction to Jazz as “the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another” (xix), is essential for female agency. Discussing the “othering” of women, it is important to note Simone de Beauvoir’s idea that the man is the subject, the absolute and in contrast, the female is the Other (26). Through this societal construction, the systematic “othering” of women has always been present and in order to be challenged and overcome, it must be acknowledged. Following this line of reasoning, to be a woman can never be defined on its own. Rather, because society defines only man, and by default, woman as being non-man, or “Other,” woman cannot exist without man, whereas man exists on his own. Morrison’s fiction often demonstrates that this idea extends to heterosexual marriage, as we frequently notice that her female characters surrender their agency in marriage. In this regard, Morrison illustrates de Beauvoir’s point that the relationship between man and woman may resemble that of master and slave, as in the eyes of the master, who controls the slave, the basis of the slave’s identity is to identify with the master to whom she belongs. Thus being “Other” places woman in a state of involuntary submission. It is essential that the woman recognizes this, and how she chooses
to reconfigure her self differs upon her circumstances. Morrison has stated that financial
dependence is damaging and in her fiction, we see that once a woman becomes financially
independent, she loses her need for a man. In other cases, her female characters need to
reconfigure themselves, overcome emotional trauma by healing, outside of their relationships
with men. Often, emotional healing comes as a result of female bonding and a connection
with ancestors. However, Morrison does not rule out romantic relationships as a means for
overcoming emotional pain, such as in the case of Sethe and Paul D in *Beloved*. Despite the
different circumstances, reconfiguration of the self is essential in establishing successful
relationships.

The process of re-memoration, the tracing of one’s ancestry, is crucial in
understanding Morrison’s female characters. LaVinia Delois Jennings explains that a
connection to the ancestors is through a relationship with the living elder and in “Home”
Morrison refers to the two as interchangeable. Morrison asserts that elders and ancestors “are
DNA” (Taylor-Guthrie 238), where we receive not only information about our past but also
protection and a sense of belonging. Thus it is not unexpected that female characters achieve
a sense of connectedness and belonging through embarking on a journey of re-memoration.
Race is an important factor that not only unites female friends but also, reconnects female
characters to their ancestors, as through a process of re-memoration, the former are able to
remember and acknowledge the latter’s hardships, and in turn, heal. In “Methodologies,”
Barbara Christian questions, “What does it mean when … millions of African Americans in
the New World are cut off from their ‘living dead,’ and cannot know their names and thus
cannot remember them? … Complete annihilation” (13). A woman who is disconnected from
her ancestors does not know herself because she does not know her ancestors and is not able
to form successful relationships.
My interest in Morrison’s work is in the importance of relationships and my work points out some ways in which different kinds of relationships help shape a female character’s sense of self. Morrison suggests that through these relationships, women are able to heal emotionally and that without human connection, the self dies, as in the literal death of Sula. My study focuses on three of Morrison’s novels: *Sula*, *Jazz* and *Beloved*. *Sula* examines the friendship between two friends, Nel and Sula, and the way it changes through the years. *Jazz* explores black urban life in the 1920s. The narrative also observes the pasts of various characters in relation to their ancestors. *Beloved* takes place during slavery. Its protagonist, Sethe, is an escaped slave but cannot free herself from the guilt of murdering her baby in order to spare her a life of enslavement. In this thesis, I focus on the female characters’ relationships with their female friends, romantic partners, ancestors and elders. Furthermore, I explore how the development of these relationships affects the female characters’ reconfiguration of self and emotional healing.

In Chapter One, I discuss female friendship and its role in the female characters’ sense of self in *Sula*. Nel and Sula meet when they are young girls and realizing early on that neither is white or male, they form a friendship that changes through the years but lasts until Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband. I discuss the important role that a man plays in ending a female friendship that would otherwise have lasted a lifetime. I also demonstrate that despite having other relationships, their friendship is the only fulfilling relationship in the girls’ lives. Further, I examine Violet and Alice’s friendship in *Jazz* and the ways in which it differs from that of Sula and Nel. I show that through Violet’s friendship with the motherly Alice, Violet is able to reclaim her agency and heal emotionally, a process which happens outside of her romantic relationship. I argue that in this case, the romantic partner is an impediment to the reconfiguration of self. Additionally, I review an alternative perspective of female friendship
in *Beloved*. Although not a central theme, friendship is important in *Beloved*, as illustrated through Amy’s physical healing of Sethe, as well as the community women coming together to save Sethe from Beloved. The three friendships on which I focus differ from one another. It is important to note, however, that none of the female characters I examine would have achieved self-actualization in the absence of female friendship.

In Chapter Two, I explore romantic relationships and more specifically, the failure of a romantic relationship if a woman surrenders her agency. I examine the role that the need for community’s approval plays in Nel and Jude’s marriage and the role of jealousy in their separation in *Sula*. I also observe Sula’s desire for a relationship with Ajax despite her refusal to conform to societal expectations, and how, in this respect, she is more similar to Nel than she realizes. Further, in *Jazz*, I discuss the deleterious effects of surrendering one’s agency in a romantic relationship with regard to Dorcas and Violet. In her pursuit of Acton, Dorcas really believes that what she wants is a relationship with him. Dorcas is dead in the beginning of the novel and as such, remains voiceless throughout. Violet, on the other hand, wishes she could be more like Dorcas and has a difficult time accepting her age, her broken marriage and the surrender of her agency. Although Joe and Violet’s marriage repairs, this outcome would not have been possible without Violet’s ability to step outside her marriage in order to reconfigure her self through the help of the motherly Alice. On the contrary, Sethe’s relationship with Paul D helps heal Sethe emotionally in *Beloved*. After Beloved leaves, he helps Sethe acknowledge that she is her “own best thing” and that in order to achieve self-fulfillment, she must overcome her guilt.

In Chapter Three, I describe the connection with ancestors through a relationship with the living elders. While analyzing Sula, I discuss Eva’s important role not only within her own family but also in the community and demonstrate that a break with the ancestors results
in Sula’s literal death. In *Jazz*, I examine the role that Violet’s ancestors play in her healing and conclude that it is her friend’s motherly role that finally allows Violet to heal and to forgive her own mother for leaving her. The significance of ancestors is a central theme in *Beloved*, as it is the only novel that is set in a time of slavery. In it, I explore the importance of African ancestors, the ones whose bodies were treated as objects, and the emotional pain that this causes not only for them directly but also for several generations of descendants. I assess how Sethe deals with the aftermath of slavery, how she understands and acknowledges her guilt and finally learns to forgive herself and let go.

When analyzing female identity formation, I apply the multiplicative approach developed by Deborah King and Patricia Hill Collins (Tesfagiorgis 235). Wolfreys, Womack and Robbins explain that instead of seeing race, class and gender as three separate systems, the multiplicative approach analyzes the combined effect of all three systems and recognizes that, at times, the influence of any of these may be more prominent than that of the others (69). Applying a multiplicative approach to the identity formation of female characters in Morrison’s fiction, I emphasize the distinct experiences of black women. The texts I bring together recognize the significance of double and triple oppression on black women’s lives and discuss black women’s disadvantaged position in society. However, they also highlight the differential experiences of black women. hooks observes that although acknowledging marginalization is important, it is more important to overcome it by building empowering female friendships. Hudson-Weems also explores the importance of female friendship in a woman’s ability to heal emotionally. Barbara Smith argues that shared experiences in dealing with racism strengthen the bond in female friendships. Christian focuses on the significance of a woman’s relationship with her elders and ancestors. Thus I intend to highlight black
women's differential experiences through exploring their relationships with each other, with their romantic partners and with their elders and ancestors.
Chapter 1: Female Friendship

Theoretical debate on the importance of female friendship stresses that without feeling a sense of belonging or connectedness among female friends, women risk feeling alienated. Female friendship, often referred to as sisterly bond or sisterhood, provides not only reciprocal emotional comfort and support but also, physical care and healing when needed. Hudson-Weems states that female friendship consists of a special bond due to shared experiences; Elizabeth Abel explains this further by arguing that in comparison to female friendship bonds, other bonds, such as romantic, parental and filial ones, do not provide a similar freedom. Race is also a shared bond that strengthens female friendship. As hooks and Smith state, female friendship among black women is of particular emotional comfort because black women bond not only on shared female experiences but also on shared experiences with racism and these create solidarity, the essence of female friendship.

Through the analysis of Nel and Sula’s friendship, as well as that of Alice and Violet and Sethe and the community, Morrison represents solidarity among women and the ways in which women find emotional and physical comfort, strength and healing in friendships with other women. Race is a uniting factor that creates the foundation for these female friendships, as illustrated by friendships that initially appear unlikely due to different backgrounds, such as between Nel and Sula and especially between Alice and Violet. Race, however, is not always the most significant bond, as demonstrated by Amy’s eagerness to save Sethe’s life in the wild. What all three of these friendships have in common is that the women share a similar socio-economic status. What is more, each turns to the other for support in a time of emotional distress. The timeline and circumstances of these friendships differ. Nel and Sula meet as young girls and their friendship lasts until they face the responsibilities of adulthood.
and patriarchal structures force their bond to end. On the contrary, Alice and Violet meet as adults with emotional wounds and help each other heal through mothering that leads to reclamation of selfhood. Sethe and Amy, on the other hand, meet during one of the most important points of their lives as they run toward freedom. They bring physical and emotional comfort to each other. The bonds of Sethe and the community are not apparent until all the women put aside their differences and join to rescue Sethe by chasing Beloved away. By presenting a variety of friendships among women, Morrison illustrates that although different, bonds of female friendship are powerful presences in women’s lives, whether they appear only for one day or for life because they provide women with strength and solidarity.

Although they initially appear unlikely, the women already have a set foundation for their bonds before their friendships even begin. In the case of Nel and Sula, their race dictates where they live. As young black girls living in Bottom, they already have a lot in common before they even decide to become friends. In *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Hudson-Weems discusses the importance of race in black women’s friendships:

> There has always been bonding among Africana women that cannot be broken—genuine sisterhood. This sisterly bond is a reciprocal one, one in which each gives and receives equally. In this community of women, all reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another. They are joined emotionally, as they embody emphatic understanding of each other’s shared experiences. Everything is given out of love, criticism included, and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards. (65)
These aspects are present in Nel and Sula’s friendship, who share a special solidarity since they are joined not only by gender but also by their race and class. Similarly, hooks states in *Feminist Theory: From Marging to Center* that women “must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood” (43). The idea of sisterhood is central in what Morrison critics call Sula and Nel’s “girlhood friendship,” which is a term that refers to the friendship’s limited duration. Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek observe that the friendship between Sula and Nel “in many ways nurtures both girls by supplying the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships” (40).

Afraid of her own mother’s past and eager to uphold the Bottom community’s moral standards, Helene raises Nel in a highly controlling and conservative household. In her sheltered world inside Medallion, Nel has only viewed her mother as the rest of the community views her, as a “tall, proud woman ... who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look” (*Sula* 22). When she realizes that she has mistakenly entered the train’s “white only” cabin, Helene smiles at the white conductor subserviently, a gesture that infuriates the black men present. Nel is both “pleased and ashamed” (22) to see their hatred and instantly changes the way she views her mother, and in turn, her own identity. After this incident, Nel views Helene as “really custard” (22), unable to uphold her own morals, and decides to distance herself from her mother’s oppressive rules without acknowledging that, in order to adapt to a racist society, Helene must act differently in front of white conductors than in Bottom. The trip plays a crucial role in Nel’s discovery, as a result of reflection after her return from the South, that she is her own person and can choose not to obey her mother. Before Nel’s recognition that she is free to act as she likes, she resolves “to be on guard – always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or
marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (22). The determination to never allow black men to hate her shows the extent to which she is affected by her first experience with racism. This passage is particularly significant because after this moment, Nel not only discovers racism and her mother’s identity as a black woman but also views Helene as weak and later sees her own act of rebellion, which is her friendship with Sula, as evidence of her own strength. As a result, Nel decides to construct her identity when she says, “I’m me. I’m not their daughter ... I’m me” (28).

Nel’s decision to befriend Sula is evidently an act of rebellion against her mother. Helene disapproves of Hannah’s unconventional household full of women and without men. She particularly worries that Sula takes after her sexually liberated mother and negatively associates the Peace household with her own mother’s sexuality from which she shields Nel. It is during the time that Nel decides to be Sula’s friend that she stops wearing the nose pin that her mother forces her to wear every night in order to reshape her nose into a smaller and more desirable one. Nel finds someone who accepts her as she is and this convinces her that she does not need to change in order to be loved. The narrator states that “the trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (Sula 29). Before the friendship even begins, Nel associates Sula with a strength that provides Nel with independence from her “really custard” mother and courage to construct her own identity. Gillespie and Kubitschek state:

In their childhood friendship, Nel’s and Sula’s antithetical strengths and weaknesses assure them mutual dependency and thus equality of participation. Sula’s preservation of her self allows Nel to limit boundaries between herself and her mother; in turn, Nel’s attention to details of connection and her calm consistently allow Sula’s rigid boundaries to become more fluid. (41)
Once Nel becomes aware of racism after discovering Helene’s weakness, she finds emotional support and acceptance from Sula and stops searching for them in her mother. Similarly, Sula finds in Nel the support and solidarity that she is lacking in her relationship with Hannah. The family dynamic in the Peace household contrasts with that of the Wright family. Unlike the Wright’s traditional structure, the Peace household is one of women and unlike strict and stifling Helene, Hannah’s priority is taking up new lovers, which results in her inability to provide maternal care. As a result, Sula faces not only neglect but also, sadness and confusion when she hears Hannah’s comment as she discusses Sula with her friend: “You love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her” (57). Sula is bewildered by her mother’s comment and even begins to cry until Nel’s call “floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). Nel rescues Sula from the hurtful discovery; the girls’ friendship is an escape not only for Nel but also for Sula. Nel is comfortable in her friend’s house; she prefers Sula’s “woolly house, where a pot ... was always cooking on the stove; where the mother ... never scolded or gave directions ... where newspapers were stacked ... and dirty dishes left for hours” (29). Nel finds in Sula’s house the comfort and freedom that she lacks in her own home; she likes Sula’s house precisely because it is so different from her own. Sula, on the other hand, loves Nel’s house; unlike Nel, who views “the oppressive neatness of her home with dread ... [Sula] loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time – still as dawn” (29). While Nel finds in Sula’s household the disorder she craves, Sula finds in Nel’s house the consistency she lacks.

The girls’ bond is strengthened not only by their mutual desire to escape lacking mother-daughter relationships but also by the fact that they belong to the same race, class and gender. Gillespie and Kubitschek argue that this “marvelous friendship does not exist in a
social vacuum, however, and just as the girls’ images of themselves are modified by the surrounding society, so is the course of the friendship” (41). The narrator states that Sula and Nel “had discovered years before that they were not white or male” (Sula 52) and that this discovery strengthened their bond. Similarly, Maureen Reddy observes that the girls are “the center of the plot about female friendship and female development and represent the effects of internalized racist stereotypes and the multiple oppression of black women” (31).

Although black inhabitants occupy Bottom, race is not enough to create solidarity among the segregated community. The girls discover this during their encounter with the young boys who surround them. In order to protect herself and Nel, Sula cuts off her own finger as a method of intimidation, which is successful and results in the boys running away in confusion and repulsion. This action may be viewed as irresponsible but Sula is not concerned with conventional morals and her priority is protecting Nel. Like her grandmother, who cuts off her leg in order to collect insurance and support her family, Sula cuts off a piece of herself in order to protect her friend. Similarly, Nel overlooks conventional morals when she protects Sula by hiding the truth about Chicken Little’s death. When Chicken Little’s hands slip from Sula’s and he falls in the water and drowns, the girls, without prior discussion, hide their knowledge from the police and from Chicken Little’s parents in order to protect each other. Wilfred Samuels and Hudson-Weems state:

By providing Sula and Nel with the secret of Chicken Little’s accidental death, and specifically by having Nel provide the strength and support Sula needed at the moment, Morrison further united them in a manner that would bond them for eternity. Although the action was Sula’s, the involvement, as Eva would later point out, was clearly theirs together. (45)
Just as Sula cuts off her own finger to protect Nel, the latter keeps Sula’s secret, sealing their friendship and illustrating that friendship bonds come first. Kubitschek argues:

Nel and Sula thus join forces to affirm for each other the personal worth that the surrounding racism and sexism deny. When Nel and Sula silently agree to keep their involvement in a playmate’s drowning a secret, their reliance on each other is confirmed. For each, the other is the only person who knows her completely. (52)

As the years pass, the girls do not discuss Chicken Little or reveal their knowledge; the secret seals their friendship. Their bond overcomes moral conventions since protecting each other is more important than revealing the truth.

Christian observes that the girls’ friendship is sustained “not only by their recognition of each other’s restrictions” (81-2) but also, by “their anticipation of sexuality and by an ultimate bond, the responsibility for unintentionally causing the death of another. However, although the two girls share these strong bonds, they are different” (81-2). The girls’ difference is pronounced before they even reach adulthood, as Nel dreams of herself “lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince” (Sula 51), while Sula spends “hours in the attic behind a roll of linoleum galloping through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses” (52). Karen Stein states that neither Sula nor Nel achieve personal fulfillment and the novel “dramatizes the ironic contrast between epic expectation and actual achievement” (147). Thus Jude does not fit Nel’s epic expectation of a fiery prince. He marries Nel not because he loves her but because he feels that her presence in his life will make him a man. Similarly, Sula achieves independence but she does so at the cost of relationships; her expectation of freedom through exploration sharply contrasts the reality of her isolation from society.
What is also important to note, however, is that, in both girls’ dreams, there is someone else watching. For Nel, “watching the dream along with her, were some smiling sympathetic eyes. Someone as interested as she herself in the flow of her imagined hair...” (Sula 51). For Sula, the dream becomes complete when “in full view of a someone who shared both the taste [of the sugar] and the speed [of the horse]” (52). In “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism,” Smith argues that Sula is “Nel’s fiery prince” (23) and Kevin Everod Quashie builds on this statement by adding that Nel is “that someone who sees Sula’s actions and is enough like Sula to experience the pace and texture of the ride” (20). The narrator does not specify whether Sula’s “someone” is male or female. Moreover, there is only one other person in Sula’s dream. As a result, one may initially conclude that Nel is indeed “that someone who sees Sula’s actions and is enough like Sula to experience the pace and texture of the ride” (20). On closer inspection, however, this is not the case because Nel not only desires a “fiery prince” but also someone watching with “sympathetic eyes” (Quashie 20). This is a crucial difference between Nel and Sula because it illustrates that from a young age, Sula seeks a companion in her adventures, whereas Nel seeks not only a companion – her fiery prince – but also, an audience, which is the community, to watch her with interest and admire her. While Sula evidently wishes to enjoy her adventures by sharing them with someone else, Nel is equally interested in finding the “sympathetic eyes”; her dream is not complete without them. For Nel, Sula is the “sympathetic eyes” but as she dances with Jude, she notices her friend “with just a hint of a strut, [walking] down the path toward the road” (85). At this moment, Nel replaces Sula’s “sympathetic eyes” with the eyes of the Bottom community, therefore granting Helene’s wish of having a respectable daughter. That Sula walks away at this very moment and that it would be “ten years before they saw each other again” (85) foreshadows Sula’s unsettling last words to Nel: “How you know it was you
[who was good]? ... I mean maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me’” (146). Sula’s decision to walk away as Nel seeks reassurance from her new husband illustrates not only Sula’s disinterestedness in the institution of marriage but also her understanding that in a way, she has lost Nel to the Bottom community. Sula is aware that while Nel could have been the companion of her adventures, she could only be the “sympathetic eyes” in Nel’s life.

Gillespie and Kubitschek argue that their friendship “empowers them until the end of their adolescence, when caretaking must be extended to the adult world of love and work” (41). As adolescence ends, the girls’ path separates; Nel sacrifices herself by entering into the institution of marriage and Sula goes on a search for adventure, realizing along the way that she is not “interested in making anybody else” (Sula 92) but only in making herself. The girls become their mothers; like Helene, Nel becomes a respectable housewife, whereas Sula travels and later, like Hannah, sleeps with the men of Medallion without emotional attachment. Their lives, however, continue to be similar in one way – reality fails to meet epic expectation. In her sexual relationships, Sula attempts, and fails, to replicate the closeness she had felt with Nel. Sula searches “all along for a friend and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman” (121). Her friendship with Nel has shaped Sula’s understanding of comradeship and her sexual encounters, which leave her feeling as if “there, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning” (123), evidently do not provide her with the companionship for which she yearns. Sula discovers that Nel is irreplaceable; when she realizes that no one “would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand” (121), she decides to be alone. She looks down upon the institution of marriage and is more interested in pursuing her own passions than in raising children, as illustrated by her choice to leave Medallion and
travel. Even when she returns, Sula not only remains romantically unattached but also an outsider of the community. Essentially, this is the life for which Sula strives—this is her epic expectation; she seeks to challenge Nel’s choices with her own and expects her freedom to result in happiness. Instead of searching for her prince and giving up her life to accommodate his, Sula chooses not to pursue a romantic relationship that she associates with loss of freedom. Her decision, however, does not stop Sula from falling in love with Ajax, as I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. Even giving up her freedom for a romantic attachment does not lead Sula to a successful relationship with Ajax; the relationship fails.

Similarly, Nel’s expectation of a happy life with Jude fails. From the beginning of their romance, Nel is happy to perform a role for Jude within their marital bond, a role that she fills with great enthusiasm. She has children, takes care of the house and joins the church, while Jude also fulfills a role, that of the husband who works at a job he hates so that he can convince himself, as well as the community, that this is what he must do in order to support his family. Nel’s feeling of “being needed by someone who saw her singly” (Sula 20) illustrates that Nel is incapable of seeing her own self; she needs Jude to see her “singly.” This emphasizes the difference between Nel and Sula. Nel is either not interested in “making herself,” or she is aware that she cannot make herself. Sula, on the other hand, believes that she can create her own identity. The fact that Nel allows Jude to create a rift in her friendship with Sula demonstrates that Nel places a greater value upon her desire to be “needed by someone who saw her singly” (20) rather than upon her friendship with Sula. Nel’s choice emphasizes her parents’ victory over Sula. Nel’s parents “had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (83), which is interesting because Nel’s sparkle is “an occasional leadership role with Sula ... During all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula” (83). Even when recalling Nel’s
“sparkle,” the reader cannot help but think of the rebellious Sula in opposition to Nel’s parents, and the community in general.

Although Nel blames Sula for taking Jude away from her by engaging in a sexual encounter with him, it is apparent from the beginning of their romance that Jude does not love Nel, but rather, he likes the idea of having a wife. Jude does not want Nel in particular, but any woman, as long as she fulfills the role of his wife. Nel, too, wants a man to fulfill the role of the “fiery prince.” In this respect, she and Jude are similar – each is a stand in for the role created by the other. The difference between the two is that Jude is aware that he is selecting Nel to fulfill this role; he knows that any other woman will serve the same purpose in the same way. Nel, on the other hand, is deceived by Jude. This is the difference not only between Jude and Nel but also between Nel and Sula. Nel embraces the role of wife, mother, caregiver, house-keeper and wants nothing more. In her mind, Jude really does become her prince. Benhabib stresses that the capacity of subjects for self-reflection and self-determination is essential to personal agency (110), the ability of a person to act for herself. Nel surrenders her agency to Jude and it takes a long time before she cries at Sula’s grave and comes to the realization that it was not Sula who stole Jude away from her. Nel gives up a part of herself in order to unite with Jude and it is precisely her willingness – eagerness even – to surrender her agency and stop growing as an individual that reminds the reader of Sula’s last words to Nel, “maybe it wasn’t me who was the bad one. Maybe it was you” (Sula 146).

Reddy states that the death of “Nel’s inner self and the death of her friendship with Sula are both attributable to externally imposed limitations on black women’s lives” (32). As black women, Nel and Sula’s opportunities are limited. They can either marry and become a part of the community, as Nel does, or reject all patriarchal values and live in isolation from
the community, as Sula does. Neither woman achieves fulfillment. By sleeping with Jude, Sula forces Nel to question her own beliefs and morality. For Sula, Nel was the one person “who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of [the affair] ... Now Nel was one of them” (Sula 119-20). Nel’s reaction to Sula’s affair with Jude allows Sula to understand that Nel is not only part of the community, she now represents the community and its morals. There is a sharp contrast between the way Sula viewed Nel in the past and the way in which she views her after the affair. Monika Hoffarth-Zelloe declares that Nel’s reaction to the affair illustrates Nel’s “inability to free herself from reliving and imitating her mother’s subservient and passive behaviour at the train station” (120). This is Nel’s epic failure, namely that as a little girl she vows never to allow a man to humiliate her but as a grown woman, she permits her husband to humiliate her. Like Sula’s reality, Nel’s reality is a disappointment in comparison to her expectation. Her husband, her children and her devotion to the community do not fulfill her. Nel needs Sula to define her identity; Nel is incapable of accepting herself without Sula because the only relationship that allows her full freedom is that with Sula. Abel concludes that male/female relationships, parental bonds and caring for children do not allow for the full freedom that female friendship does. Nel and Sula’s friendship is ideal because it is based “not on love or obligation but on the adolescent need for identification and the adult need for independence” (Abel 429). As black women, Nel and Sula must contend with societal limitations. Moral conventions terminate their friendship, even though it has been a source of strength, comfort and solidarity. While Nel sacrifices her search for self in order to serve her community, Sula abandons her community in order to find herself. Morrison juxtaposes Nel and Sula’s choices to illustrate the difference between the two; Nel lives by the community’s rules and Sula does not. As a result, Nel views Jude and Sula’s affair as
betrayal, while Sula views it as yet another one of her sexual relationships.

Despite their different paths, neither achieves fulfillment. Sula dies alone and thinking of Nel, who holds on to resentment for many years. It is only when Nel visits Eva, who tells her that she and Sula are “just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you” (Sula 169), that she finally comes to the realization that she did indeed watch Chicken Little die in the same way that Sula watched Hannah burn to death. Nel realizes that despite their different paths, she and Sula are similar not only in witnessing death but also, in refusing to take responsibility for their actions. Sula does not take responsibility for causing Nel pain by sleeping with Jude, whereas Nel does not take responsibility for the passive role she plays in her own life. Nel gives up herself entirely in order to mold into the role of mother, wife and respectful member of the community. She holds on to this role even after Jude leaves and motherhood and the community fail to fulfill her. She refuses to reflect upon her role as abandoned wife when Sula tells her that “maybe it wasn’t me who was the bad one. Maybe it was you” (146). Nel continues to hold on to her resentment even after Sula dies. It is Sula, however, who plays a crucial role in Nel’s ability to recognize and move past her own failures. It is only after hearing Eva’s words that Nel accepts her active role in Chicken Little’s death and recognizes the extent of her love for Sula. Nel cries at Sula’s grave that “all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude” (174) when, in fact, she was missing Sula. Throughout the years, Nel has not been honest with herself; she sacrifices her feelings for her assumed role in Bottom. In Communion: The Female Search for Love, hooks argues that women who are honest with themselves and others “do not fear being vulnerable. We do not fear that another woman can expose or unmask us. We do not fear annihilation, for we know no one can destroy our integrity as women who love” (137). Because Nel is not honest with herself, she fears her vulnerability and blames Sula. However, as soon as she embraces
the truth that she, too, had a role in Chicken Little's death and further, that she has been lying to herself about missing Jude, she lets go of resentment and acknowledges her love for Sula. In this respect, Nel’s tears can be interpreted as her recognition that it was moral conventions and patriarchal rules that separated her from her friend, her only source of strength and solidarity.

Morrison observes that she has “never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter” (“Home” 3). Her writing reflects the crucial role that race plays in the black community. Similarly to Sula and Nel’s friendship, the friendship between Alice and Violet in Jazz, though unexpected and seemingly unlikely, is rooted in a foundation of shared race, class and gender. Despite their differences, Alice and Violet are both black women struggling in social isolation while attempting to overcome their financial burdens. It is this shared racial and socio-economic identity that creates the foundation for their friendship.

After the funeral scene, Violet becomes obsessed with Dorcas; the dead girl’s memory is “a sickness in the house – everywhere and nowhere” (Jazz 28) for Violet. Although the girl is dead, both Joe and Violet feel her presence in their home. Joe misses her and Violet is consumed by jealousy. Joe’s affair angers her. At first she seeks revenge, which later settles into deep sorrow. Even before she finds out about the affair, Violet has lost the connection she once had with Joe. Around him, she “shuts up. Speaks less and less until ‘uh’ or ‘have mercy’ carry almost all of her part of a conversation ... her silences annoy her husband, then puzzle him and finally depress him” (24). Additionally, she is isolated from the community, and the neighbourhood nicknames her Violent. It is apparent that Violet is full of “private cracks” (23), emotional wounds that need to heal. Her emotional pain shows “ill-glued cracks and weak places beyond which is anything ... she stumbles onto these cracks, like the time when ... she stepped back and folded her legs ... to sit in the street” (23). Having no friends
and living in an unsatisfying romantic relationship and in isolation from the community, Violet lacks not only emotional support but also, agency. Moreover, she yearns for a baby and in her state of emotional distress, attempts to steal one in hopes of repairing her marriage because that “longing became heavier than sex: a panting, unmanageable craving ... Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming ... When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be that daughter...” (109). This is the emotional distress in which Violet finds herself when she first goes to sit down and rest in Alice’s house. That the narrator compares Dorcas’s age with that of Violet’s child, if she had had one, foreshadows the way Violet eventually views Dorcas – as the daughter she never had rather than the young girl who stole her husband’s affections.

The shift in this view, however, cannot happen without the development of Violet’s friendship with Alice. It is with Alice that Violet discusses and eventually comes to terms with her concerns about Joe’s affair. What begins as curiosity about Dorcas turns into something bigger – conversations about life, which lead not only to a friendship between the women but also, to the women overcoming their anxieties. Without Alice’s help – their conversations and Alice’s ability to literally and figuratively “repair the seams” – Violet would not be able to recover from her pain. A passage of particular importance is when Violet asks Alice whether to stay with Joe:

‘We born around the same time, me and you,’

‘We women, me and you. Tell me something real. Don’t just say I’m grown and ought to know. I don’t. I’m fifty and I don’t know nothing. What about it? Do I stay with him? I want to, I think. I want... well, I didn’t always... now I want. I want some fat in this life.’

‘Wake up. Fat or lean, you got just one. This is it.’
'You don't know either, do you?'

'I know enough to know how to behave.'

'Is that it? Is that all it is?'

'Is that all what is?'

'Oh shoot! Where the grown people? Is it us?'

'Oh, Mama.' Alice Manfred blurted it out and then covered her mouth. (110)

In this passage, Violet is not only questioning whether she should stay with Joe, but she is also beginning to pay attention to what she wants. She begins to talk about Joe, but then reflects on what she wants and on how this has changed over time. Similarly to the dynamics of this passage, Violet's crisis begins with her discovery of Joe's affair and continues with her reflecting upon her own life. When Alice says, “Fat or lean, you got just one. This is it” (110), she means that Violet only has one life, but this can also be understood as Alice telling Violet that she only has one self, especially when she follows this up with, “I know enough to know how to behave” (110). Alice is insinuating that Violet does not know how to behave and Violet agrees with this viewpoint to a certain extent because she refers to the self who attacked Dorcas’s corpse as “that Violet,” different from the one who knows how to behave.

The expression, “that Violet,” is used repeatedly throughout the book to indicate the change that Violet undergoes. The city affects her so that by the time Joe falls in love with Dorcas, Violet believes that she is a completely different person than the Violet with whom she believes Joe fell in love. This perceived split in character is significant because during the majority of the novel, Violet attempts to distinguish between her “true self,” “this Violet,” and the self who is to blame for the cracks, “that Violet.” It is through her conversations with Alice that Violet is finally able to take responsibility for having surrendered her agency by
allowing the world to change her and to understand that “this Violet” and “that Violet” are indeed the same Violet, her unfixed and fluid identity with which she must come to terms.

When Felice asks her at the end of the novel what she means when she says that she messed up her life, Violet answers, “[I] forgot it was mine. My life. I just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else” (208). The conversations with Alice help Violet to reach the conclusion that this is indeed it – she only has one self. In her final conversation with Felice, she refers to her one self and says that she “killed [that Violet]. Then I killed the me that killed her ... [Who’s left is] me” (209). During her conversation with Alice, Violet wonders where the grown people are because she does not feel grown. The fact that her question, “Where the grown people? Is it us?” (110) comes after her other questions illustrates that for Violet, a grown person is someone who has these answers. On the contrary, at the end of the novel during her conversation with Felice, the latter is asking the questions and Violet is providing the answers, indicating that Violet is now the grownup.

Additionally, her friendship with Alice helps Violet to stop being threatened by other women. When talking to her client, Violet says: “Women wear me down. No man ever wore me down ... It’s these little hungry girls acting like women. Not content with boys their own age ... they want somebody old enough to be their father” (Jazz 14). After she finds out about Joe’s affair, Violet feels vulnerable; she is threatened by other women and, specifically, in this passage, Dorcas. When her client states that it is men who wear women down “to a sharp piece of gristle if you let them” (14), Violet answers that it is not men who do this, but rather, women. This indicates that Violet blames Dorcas, rather than Joe, for their affair. For a long time, Violet is bitter because Dorcas had what she will never again have – youth. Violet is not honest with herself; she does not take responsibility for allowing Dorcas and Joe to dictate her self worth, and therefore, destroy her integrity with their affair. She
fears being vulnerable and focuses not on her own behaviour, but on the actions of others. As Violet herself says, she does not like who she is and wishes that she was “white. Light. Young again” (208). When discussing these topics with her clients, Violet is concentrating on placing the blame on young women, and, more specifically, Dorcas, wishing she was like her:

... Not only is she losing Joe to a dead girl, but she wonders if she isn’t falling in love with her too. When she isn’t trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl’s hair; when she isn’t cursing Joe with brand-new cuss words, she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head; when she isn’t worrying about his loss of appetite, his insomnia, she wonders what colour were Dorcas’ eyes. Her aunt had said brown; the beauticians said black but Violet had never seen a light-skinned person with coal-black eyes. One thing, for sure, she needed her ends cut. In the photograph and from what Violet could remember from the coffin, the girl needed her ends cut. Hair that long gets fraggely easy. Just a quarter-inch trim would do wonders, Dorcas.

Dorcas. (15)

This passage illustrates Violet’s obsession with Dorcas; she spends her time thinking about Dorcas or about ways to make Joe’s life miserable. She is at once jealous and critical of Dorcas and wishes that she could be more like her. What is noticeably absent in this passage is Violet’s preoccupation with herself. In particular, this quotation demonstrates the point that Violet makes to Felice at the end of the novel when she says that she forgot herself. When she does remember herself, it is because she wishes she were different.

Violet eventually stops viewing herself as victim and reclaims her self through the solidarity and emotional support with which her friendship with Alice provide her. While
examining detrimental effects of the victim complex in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks clarifies:

[Black women] cannot afford to see themselves solely as ‘victims’ because their own survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possess. It would be psychologically demoralizing for these women to bond with other women on the basis of shared victimization. They bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources ... It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood. (46)

When Violet first goes to Alice, she is emotionally distressed. Her reliance on Alice, her need for a place to rest, is psychologically demoralizing, as Violet is caught in a self-victimizing cycle of jealousy, insecurity and unhappiness. When all else fails her, Violet finds comfort in female solidarity by confiding in Alice, whose response is: “Give me that coat. I can’t look at that lining another minute” (*Jazz* 110). While mending her ripped lining, Alice helps heal Violet by providing her with a source of strength and solidarity; Violet enters Alice’s house as a victim but during her time there, she reclaims her self and integrity. Similar to Violet, Alice does not initially have all the answers, although in their friendship she is the one who continuously appears stronger. She is the seamstress and Violet is the torn clothing that needs repair. Alice begins to rely on Violet as much as Violet relies on her. She begins to wait for Violet’s visits “with less hesitation than before” (76) because when Violet comes to visit, Alice is able to speak with honesty and clarity: “With Violent she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal. No apology or courtesy seemed required or necessary between them. But something else was – clarity, perhaps. The kind of clarity crazy people demand from the not-crazy” (83).

Alice’s explanation of her friendship with Violet illustrates that their relationship is turning into Hudson-Weems’s idea of female friendship, in which women give and receive
“equally ... [they] reach out in support of each other, demonstrating a tremendous sense of responsibility for each other by looking out for one another” (65). Alice not only looks out for Violet, but she is responsible for lifting Violet out of her emotional pain by providing her with the “mending” that she needs. In turn, Alice is able to communicate her pain honestly and directly, even impolitely, with Violet. Her manner of communication only adds to their already established friendship. Her clarity and honesty are from what Hudson-Weems refers to as criticism “given out of love ... and in the end, the sharing of the common and individual experiences and ideas yields rewards” (65). Alice’s harsh tone toward Violet is indeed given out of love, as even as she speaks harshly to Violet, she does so while literally and figuratively mending her lining. Violet is as valuable to Alice as Alice is to Violet. Since Alice feels and talks differently in Violet’s company, she gains clarity only through conversations with Violet. The two find comfort in each other because neither has anyone else with whom to discuss their concerns with such clarity. Violet has no friends, she has stopped talking to Joe and when she confides in her clients, the response she gets is, “That’s my ear, girl! You going to press it too?” (14). Alice, on the other hand, has lost both her husband and her niece; she has no children and she is too angry at society to go outside of her apartment and play an active role in the community. The reward of these shared experiences inside of Alice’s apartment is the female friendship that is formed among the women and the self-fulfillment that comes as a result. Soon enough the women step out of their roles as caregiver and victim.

One of the most significant moments in their friendship comes after yet another serious conversation between the women when Violet realizes that Alice has accidentally burned the shirt she has been ironing: “Violet was the first to smile. Then Alice. In no time laughter was rocking them both” (Jazz 113). At this time, Violet remembers laughing with
True Belle, who could barely control her laughter “from pulling her down to the floor with them. They should have hated her. Gotten up from the floor and hated her. But what they felt was better. Not beaten, not lost. Better” (113). While laughing with Alice, Violet recalls the lesson that she “had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears” (113). Violet’s comparison of this laughter with the moment when she first learned of “more complicated, more serious than tears” (113) laughter with True Belle illustrates that Alice becomes like family to Violet. Similar to the laughter with True Belle, this laughter comes at a time of significant hardship in Violet’s life. Albrecht-Crane states that this laughter is serious because “contrary to tears, which give in to the pressure, laughter explodes it, escapes it and creates something new” (65). What is new is the recognition of their friendship, the awareness that they have come to depend upon each other for individual growth through conversations that bring clarity through reflection. At this moment, the women are “strong, not beaten, not lost, because they affirm that they cannot be completely defined by the social forces surrounding them” (Albrecht-Crane 65). Their bonding through strength is what hooks refers to as the essence of female friendship. Their laughter is the symbol of their resistance, the women “acknowledge that identity matters, but they push beyond its power to affirm a dynamic of belonging that defies identity” (Albrecht-Crane 66). They are defying the women they have become. Violet’s laughter indicates that she understands the irrationality of her action when she went to stab the already dead Dorcas. Violet thinks about how “she must have looked at the funeral, at what her mission was. The sight of herself trying to do something bluesy, something hep, fumbling the knife, too late anyway... She laughed till she coughed...” (114). Violet’s newfound clarity allows her to recognize her own irrationality and laugh at it. It is her friendship with Alice that leads her to this point. Laughter indicates healing in both women.
Elizabeth Cannon explains that one significant factor in Violet and Alice's friendship is that the women come to recognize each other as subjects. Further, she argues that without this subject recognition, the friendship cannot take place. She uses Jessica Benjamin’s idea of “intersubjectivity,” the process during which recognition “occurs when person A recognizes person B as a subject independent of A’s fantasies of B” (Cannon 243-44), a moment when the subject[s] “acknowledge[s] that the other person really exists in the here and now, not merely in the symbolic dimension” (244). In the beginning of the novel, Alice thinks of Violet as a violent woman and Violet thinks of Alice as simply Dorcas’s aunt. Cannon notes that it is during one of their conversations that this changes and each woman begins to see the other as a subject (244). This shift in view occurs when Violet tells Alice, “I’m not the one you need to be scared of” (Jazz 80). When Alice asks who is, Violet says, “I don’t know. That’s what hurts my head” (80). Cannon states that it is during the process of “figuring out what hurts Violet’s head and what makes Alice angry that the two come to see each other as subjects” (244). Violet and Alice, who might have had a lifelong feud, reconcile after helping each other heal. They come to see each other as subjects, a point which is carried further by Andrea O’Reilly, who states that Violet is “daughter” to Alice:

Morrison argues that self-love depends upon the self’s first being loved by another self. Before the child can love herself, she must experience herself being loved and learn that she is indeed valuable, and deserving of affection. In all of her writings, Morrison emphasizes how essential mothering is for the emotional well-being of children, because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives the child a loved sense of self. (367)

Alice repairs Violet's cracks by reminding her of her value. Her significant role as “mother” becomes apparent as Violet's conversations with Alice slowly become less about Dorcas and
Joe and more about how she can empower herself. Alice provides Violet with emotional well-being and during this time of isolation in Violet’s life, she is the only one to do so. As a result, an important observation about Violet’s life is that healing leads to self-discovery that happens outside of her romantic relationship. Through the relationship with a woman, her friendship with Alice, Violet experiences self-actualization, emotional maturity and acceptance of the self. Her romantic relationship with Joe impended such development. In fact, Joe must learn to fall in love with Violet all over again, as she is a “new” Violet. Similarly, Alice’s husband is dead and her emotional healing also happens outside of a romantic relationship. This demonstrates that achieving self-actualization is a process that takes place in the absence of men. In order to succeed in a romantic relationship, a woman must first learn to love and value herself, as Violet does with Alice’s help. As a result, female friendship bonds are not only important in providing solidarity during times of emotional distress but also, in being the foundation of self-love and, in turn, the foundation for any other relationships.

Violet’s conversation with Felice illustrates that she has achieved self-fulfillment by completing her healing journey and this is apparent when she says that now she wants to be “the woman my mother didn’t stay around long enough to see. That one. The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before” (Jazz 208). Her mention of her mother, as well as her reference to the self that she “used to like before” (208), the self that was not emotionally wounded, illustrates O’Reilly’s point that Violet’s healing journey takes her back to her imaginary self and the mother she lost, a process that is made possible with the help of motherly Alice. The role of mother, or source of strength and emotional support, is one that Violet takes on in her relationship with Felice, its importance relying on the fact that female friendship bonds and emotional healing provided by a “motherly sister” are passed on
from woman to woman. At the end of the novel she is not threatened by Felice’s presence around Joe despite the fact that Felice, like Dorcas, is a young girl. When Violet realizes that Felice is crying over Dorcas’s death for the first time, she takes on a maternal role when she says, “Come to supper, why don’t you. Friday evening. You like catfish?” (211).

Violet and Alice’s friendship seems like an unlikely connection at first but it turns into a true friendship, one which brings comfort and reconciliation to both women. What is more, it relieves Violet’s anxiety about Joe’s affair and allows her to view other women as subjects, as is evident by the way she treats Felice. Alice’s motherly role is taken on by Violet in her friendship with Felice and this illustrates that Alice has successfully mended the “rips and tears” of Violet’s “lining.” It is now Violet’s turn to repair Felice’s seams and she succeeds in doing this. It is Violet’s meditation on “me” that inspires Felice to stop viewing herself as victim and to engage in forging an identity based on newly discovered principles of a self, “a secret somebody you didn’t have to feel sorry for or have to fight for” (Jazz 210). Felice begins to do exactly what Violet did after Alice told her, “Fat or lean, you got just one” (110) – she reflects on her past experiences and decides to cherish an authentic “me,” which is the “me” that recognizes and accepts that the self is unstable and flexible.

Although female friendship is not one of the central themes in Beloved, it is still present. When it is not, its absence is significant. Nicole Coonradt states that to date, there are no scholarly studies exclusively focused on Amy Denver. She argues that Amy Denver is a friend to Sethe and that she is “integral to the very telling of the story, for without her there would likely be no story” (169). Unlike Nel and Sula, who grow up together and become parts of each other, and Alice and Violet, who get to know each other slowly and become friends through solidarity, comfort and support, Sethe and Amy meet each other by chance as they are both on the run. Their friendship lasts only one day. Sethe’s memory of Amy,
however, lasts a lifetime. In gratitude for saving her life, Sethe names her newborn daughter after her. Through Amy and Sethe’s friendship, Morrison represents a friendship that does not have to be developed conventionally, as in the case of Sula and Nel’s childhood friendship or Alice and Violet’s “seams repair” adult friendship. Amy and Sethe have a few things in common. Both are running away to freedom (Sethe away from slavery and Amy away from indentured servitude, in which she was born due to her mother’s immediate death after giving birth to her). Both are alone with no other supports. Both have also suffered beatings, as is illustrated when Amy is shocked to see Sethe’s “tree” and shares her story about her own “whippings, but I don’t remember nothing like this. Mr. Buddy had a right evil hand too. Whipped you for looking at him straight” (Beloved 93). Further, Coonradt notes that Amy’s mother, who was “give to Mr. Buddy,” may have been raped by him, as Amy tells Sethe that “Joe Nathan said Mr. Buddy is my daddy, but I don’t believe that” (80). Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother and Sethe herself have all been sexually abused. Through Amy Denver, Morrison establishes one of the most degrading aspects “of human abuse: sexual enslavement of women at the hands of sadistic masters, the most extreme subjugation of women in a white patriarchal culture that historically touched women irrespective of their ethnicity” (Coonradt 172). A significant point of difference in Sethe and Amy’s friendship in comparison to that of Sula and Nel or Alice and Violet is that the women do not share a racial background; Sethe is black and Amy is white. They do, however, share a lack of freedom due to their similar socio-economic status. In their powerful solidarity, despite its short length of time, Morrison illustrates that race is not the most significant aspect of setting the foundation for female friendship.

When the women first see each other, both are unimpressed. Sethe thinks that Amy is “the raggediest-looking trash you ever saw … [with] arms like cane stalks and enough hair
for four or five heads" (Beloved 32). Amy thinks similarly of Sethe, as she tells her: "You ‘bout the scariest looking something I ever seen" (32). Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin explore how Morrison places these two “throw-away people, two lawless outlaws” (84):

... In parallel destinies in a relationship combining secularity and interaction. This intense and emotionally charged structure constitutes the next stage in the character definition before ... [the] heroines immerse themselves in the rituals of community ... exploring an intermediary pattern of relationships, the intimate or proximate sphere that no longer wholly contributes to the definition of their personalities but is still distinct from more impersonal collective pressure. (40)

The women are alone in the wild, where the rules differ from those of civilization. Although Sethe’s priority in the farm is survival, where her baby does not survive, the wild challenges her in a different way. In the wild, there are no other people until Amy appears, and when she does, the women are frightened, hungry and both in need of another human being on whom to rely. Due to their desperation, their gender and poverty bring them even closer together to create a connection that would have been unlikely in other circumstances. Coonradt explains that one “manifestation of their interaction is the communion of lost souls and the vital and hopeful mothering ritual of birth in which they immerse themselves” (173). When Sethe is in pain, Amy rubs her back and brings physical relief to her. Amy’s “mothering” resonates with Alice “repairing the seams.” While Alice helps Violet to heal emotionally, Amy brings much needed physical relief to Sethe and what is more, she delivers Sethe’s baby. When Sethe complains that her body hurts, Amy says that nothing can “heal without pain, you know” (78) and “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (35). The latter quotation foreshadows the return of Beloved from the dead and the former foreshadows the pain that Sethe must go
through before she heals, physically as well as emotionally. Before she leaves, Amy insists that Sethe tell her baby the story about “who brought her into this here world … You hear? Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston” (100), to which Sethe replies by saying, “That’s pretty. Denver. Real pretty” (100) and she proceeds to name her daughter after the girl who saved them both.

Friendship is not always present in the novel and when it is not, its absence is significant. From the beginning, loneliness and absence of friendship is emphasized when Paul D arrives. Denver remembers that “for twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died, there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends” (Beloved 14) and that “… [she] was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother – serious losses since there were no children … to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing” (14-15). Denver’s only companion is her mother and she is so afraid to lose her that out of jealousy of her mother’s connection with Paul D, she snaps at them: “How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed” (16). It is apparent that Denver isolates her mother, who she at once resents and loves. When Beloved arrives, Denver is excited and eager to take care of her:

Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her labored breathing and, out of love and a breakneck possessiveness that charged her, hid like a personal blemish Beloved’s incontinence. She rinsed the sheets secretly, after Sethe went to the restaurant and Paul D went scrounging for barges to help unload. She boiled the underwear and soaked it in bluing, praying the fever would pass without damage. So intent was her nursing, she forgot to eat or visit the emerald closet … Patience, something Denver had never known, overtook her. As long as her mother did not interfere, she was a model of
compassion, turning waspish, though, when Sethe tried to help. (64-65)

Denver has been so lonely that as soon as she sees a girl who does not refuse to enter her house, she nurses her back to health with apparent hopes to win her friendship. Denver's possessiveness is a result of her loneliness and resembles the possessiveness she feels for Sethe when Paul D arrives and takes away her attention. Sethe recognizes the negative effect of isolation on Denver when she “looked at her daughter and thought, Yes, she has been lonesome. Very lonesome” (65). Sethe has been too preoccupied by her own guilt to notice until now. When Sethe and Beloved become obsessed with each other, however, Denver first feels left out and then concerned for Beloved. When she understands that her friendship with Beloved is no longer healthy for herself or her mother, she decides to begin working in order to support her mother, who nearly stops functioning in an attempt to gain forgiveness and make up for lost time with Beloved.

Even the community women notice that Beloved almost possesses Sethe, who surrenders her agency to the memory of her dead daughter. Ella, the neighbourhood woman, convinces the others that a rescue is in order:

[She] understood Sethe’s rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated. When she got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lives as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn't give her the time of day. (303)

Ella's explanation for staying away from Sethe gives the reader some insight as to why the community women do not befriend Sethe. They perceive Sethe’s lack of gesture to anybody upon her departure from jail as pride and they are perhaps quick to judge, as they do not wonder whether the reason behind Sethe’s silence is that she is traumatized. Despite how
they feel about Sethe, however, the community women come to her rescue. This is another example of a very different kind of female friendship in *Beloved* when compared to that in *Sula* and *Jazz*. In this particular case, the friendship is not one between Sethe and another woman, but rather, all the community women coming together in solidarity to rescue Sethe. This is the dynamic of the community since the women are not necessarily good friends with each other. Nobody loves Ella and she “wouldn’t have liked it if they had, for she considered love a serious disability. Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called ‘the lowest yet’” (*Beloved* 301). Ella has been hurt and as a result, has apparently decided not to love or be loved. She does show sentiment, however, as she gathers all the women to rescue Sethe, even only because she “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (302). Thirty women come together not to support Sethe emotionally, but to physically chase away Beloved and after they do so, they do not go into 124 to be with Sethe. For them, it is enough that Beloved is gone. Due to Beloved’s departure and the return of Paul D, Sethe does finally begin to heal. Despite that their presence is not always felt, the women are there for Sethe when it becomes apparent that she needs help. Their friendship and solidarity – or help – is different from Nel and Sula’s and Alice and Violet’s, but the fact that thirty arrive to send Beloved away illustrates their willingness to help in time of need.

The need for female friendship is apparent in the lives of these women and what is more, with the exception of Sethe and Paul D, it is friendship that provides much needed emotional healing and not romantic relationships. Nel and Sula’s girlhood friendship provides an escape from failed mother-daughter relationships then grows into a stronger bond that is broken by adult responsibilities and patriarchal structures. As their bond weakens with Nel’s marriage then breaks due to Sula’s affair with Jude, the women become lost and unable
to reach personal fulfillment without each other. By providing a female friendship which leads Sula to think only of Nel as she dies and which leads Nel’s epiphany to be about her friend rather than about her husband, Morrison emphasizes the significant role that female bonding plays in women’s achievement of personal fulfillment. Similarly, by providing an example of Alice and Violet’s friendship that leads to emotional healing and self-discovery outside of romantic relationships, Morrison stresses this point. Violet’s self-discovery happens in Alice’s house without Joe’s presence. He has to learn to fall in love with Violet all over again, as her conversations with Alice change her. The only example where romantic love provides emotional healing is of Sethe and Paul D. Even in Beloved, it is Amy’s support and the women’s decision to rescue Sethe by chasing Beloved away that make it possible for Sethe to survive. In these three novels, survival, self-discovery and emotional healing of female characters are developments that take place in the company of, and as a result of, women.
Chapter 2: Women in Romantic Relationships and “Reconfiguration of Self”

In the forward to *Jazz*, Morrison states that in this novel, she “intended to examine couple love – the reconfiguration of the ‘self’ in such relationships; the negotiation between individuality and commitment to another” (xix). Addressing the question raised in *Jazz*: “What is it that compels a good woman to displace the self, herself?” (xix) Morrison illustrates how this negotiation is a struggle for the women in this novel, more specifically for Dorcas and Violet. In order to have successful romantic relationships, the women must first “reconfigure” themselves. Dorcas dies without accomplishing this, or even realizing the significance that the “reconfiguration of the ‘self’” has in the sustainability of romantic relationships. She lacks self-recognition and measures her value by the amount of attention she receives from men. Neola’s stories make Dorcas “enchanted by the frail, melty tendency of the flesh” (*Jazz* 63) and she yearns for romantic love, which she decides to pursue in her sixteenth year at a party by offering to dance with a pair of brothers. When one of them “looks [her] up and down as she moves toward them” (67) and the other “wrinkles his nose and turns away” (67), she reacts by feeling “ice floes that block up her veins” (67). Dorcas feels that she has been “acknowledged, appraised and dismissed ... The body she inhabits is unworthy. Although it is young and all she has, it is as if it had decayed on the vine at budding time” (67). The brothers are strangers to Dorcas and yet she grants them the ability to determine her value. In her mind, their dismissal makes her body unworthy and decayed. This encounter leaves her so vulnerable that “by the time Joe Trace whispered to her through the crack of a closing door her life had become almost unbearable” (67) because her hunger for romantic love, for what she refers to as “Paradise,” was “mesmerizing, directed, floating like a public secret” (67). Dorcas’s relationship with Joe then begins not due to her genuine
desire for Joe, but rather, as a result of her yearning for romantic love and desperate need for validation, which she places upon a romantic partner.

Cannon argues that Dorcas initially appears independent when she is involved with Joe but feels uncomfortable with this independence. As a result, she desires and seeks out Acton, who she believes gives her "personality," physical and behavioural peculiarities that she believes make her unique or distinct from other girls. Dorcas thinks that Joe "didn't even care what I looked like. I could be anything, do anything – and it pleased him. Something about that made me mad" (Jazz 190). Specifically, she is infuriated that Joe does not try to change or control her. She likes Acton because he tells her when he does not like the way she fixes her hair. She changes her laugh to one he likes better. In order to impress him, she plays with her "food now. Joe liked for me to eat it all up and want more. Acton gives me a quiet look when I ask for seconds. He worries about me that way. Joe never did. Joe didn't care what kind of woman I was" (190). Dorcas seeks to see herself through the eyes of another, more specifically a man, a lover. She does not like herself because she feels that she has no personality. As a result, she does not like Joe because he accepts her as she is and is not interested in changing her in any way. Dorcas's reconfiguration of the 'self' during her relationship with Joe results in her desire to terminate the relationship; there cannot be a negotiation between her individuality and her commitment to Joe because she lacks self-recognition.

In Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, René Girard concludes that there is no such thing as original and individual desire and that all desires are mediated through what others desire. That is to say that desire is not spontaneous, but rather, it is created when the subject desires an object due to a mediator. Per Bjørnar Grande observes that although the word mimetic "was not yet in use, the starting point of Girardian
theory was a reflection on *imitative desire* ... the basic understanding of desire is a desire according to the other” (22). According to Girard, the subject desires an object based only on the value that the mediator places upon it therefore creating a triangle of desire. In Dorcas’s case, it is not herself she wishes to please, but her audience. The subject, Dorcas, gets pleasure from believing that she possesses the object, Acton, who is wanted by the mediator, the other girls. Her desire for an audience resembles Nel’s in that both wish to be followed by watchful eyes in their quest for romance. Dorcas’s ideal romance includes “girlfriends to talk to about it. About where we went and what he did. About things. About stuff. What good are secrets if you can’t talk to anybody about them?” (Jazz 189). Dorcas does not value Joe since he is married and the affair must remain hidden. Since the secret removes the mediator and its value on the object, it erases the subject’s desire and makes the object worthless.

Girard notes that throughout the centuries, external mediation, which, for example, is ordinary people imitating knights, as in the case of Don Quixote, has turned into internal mediation, which is imitation of fellow ordinary people. As a result, he concludes that in our time, the nature of imitation is “hard to perceive because the most fervent imitation is the most vigorously denied” (15). Dorcas’s desire is an example of internal mediation. She desires Acton because she believes that in acquiring him, she is showing that she has character. In reality, she is imitating the other girls who want him and her desire is not hers at all. The mediators, the girls she wants to imitate and by whom she wants to be envied, dictate her desire through the high value they place on Acton. Through her emphasis on getting a personality, Dorcas denies this imitation even to herself; thus illustrating Girard’s point. Dorcas believes she is gaining independence by allowing Acton to dictate her choices.Appearances are crucial to Dorcas. She mistakenly believes that if she improves her looks, she will improve her personality. She says that she wants to have a distinctive personality and
that with Acton she is “getting one. I have a look now ... bracelets are just below my elbow.
Sometimes I knot my stockings below ... my knees. Three straps are across my instep ... I
have shoes with leather ...” (Jazz 190). Dorcas’s comment, “I have a look now” (190),
follows her statement that she is “getting” a personality and this illustrates that she thinks that
material objects – bracelets, stockings, straps across her instep and shoes with leather – will
maker her seemingly unique. Moreover, she equates the fact that Acton cares about her
appearance with love and concludes that because Joe does not care about how she looks, he
does not care for her. With Acton, she is eager to show that he belongs to her. As she dances
with him, she states that “lots of girls here want to be doing this with him ... I rub my
thumbnail over his nape so the girls will know I know they want him” (191). Not only does
part of the thrill of being with Acton include winning something that the other girls want but
also, Dorcas takes comfort in being possessed by Acton; she says that she is Acton’s and “it’s
Acton I want to please. He expects it. With Joe I pleased myself because he encouraged me
to. With Joe I worked the stick of the world, the power in my hand” (191). Cannon notes that
Dorcas’s apparent independence in her relationship with Joe makes her uncomfortable. As a
result, she seeks out Acton, who gives her a “personality” by dictating her choices.

Dorcas’s happiness with Acton surfaces from fulfilling her superficial fantasy, which
Felice describes as making up love scenes that were “fun and a little smutty. Something
about it bothered me though. Not the loving stuff, but the picture I had of myself when I did
it. Nothing like me” (208-09). Meanwhile, the reader is not told whether Dorcas is bothered
by these made up love scenes and, since she takes comfort in being Acton’s object of desire,
we can safely assume that she welcomes the aspect of the fantasy that makes Felice sick.
Mistakenly, Dorcas achieves fulfillment from living this part of the fantasy. Moreover,
Dorcas, unlike Felice, does not have a “me,” a core personality that she accepts as her own.
While Felice understands that their love fantasies are “nothing like [her]” (209), Dorcas strives to fulfill these love fantasies without being bothered by whether they are anything like her. Dorcas is eager to change in order to turn herself into a fantasy and this is indeed what happens.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir challenges the idea that woman is defined and differentiated “with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other” (26). To be a woman then is defined by not being a man, by being something different than the subject. Further, de Beauvoir explains that the state of being the Other places woman in a position of involuntary submission:

> No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view. (27)

As a result, the definition of woman as something other than man does not account for the being of woman, or even for woman’s desire with regards to her own definition of self. According to this erroneous assumption, in order to be defined, woman must be silenced. Dorcas wants to be silenced; her wish is to become the object of Acton’s desire and the fulfillment of her wish is reflected in the style of narration. That Dorcas is dead at the beginning of the novel correlates with her voicelessness. The reader learns about her story through the narration of others – Joe’s, Felice’s and Alice’s. The only time during which Dorcas “speaks” is when she describes herself as Acton’s object of desire during the party, which she depicts as “inspiring. Glamorous. Afterward there will be some chatter and
recapitulation of what went on; nothing though like the action itself and the beat that pumps the heart” (Jazz 191). Ironically, it is on this night that Dorcas’s heart stops pumping. The fulfillment of her own fantasy to be a male’s object of desire results in her death. Ethel Person states that for the female, “the romantic quest leads to the female being singled out among all other women by a male – the man’s singling her out then becomes proof of her value” (246). The value Dorcas seeks is to be singled out by Acton, as is illustrated by her reaction to their romance when she excitedly tells Felice, “I won him. I won!” (216) even though Acton is indifferent to her, as “sometimes he is where he says he’ll be, sometimes not” (188). As Michelle Loris states, Dorcas represents “those women who submit to domination and lose their self not out of fear but out of a desire for recognition” (58).

Unlike Dorcas’s romantic love, which results in her objectification, Violet’s romantic relationship has a happy ending, because contrary to Dorcas, Violet embarks on the journey toward self-recognition. De Beauvoir urged women to decline to be the Other (34), to refuse to be part of the deal by allowing themselves to be defined by men and in the process, to become objects of their desire. By creating a sharp contrast between Violet’s and Dorcas’s outcomes, Morrison emphasizes the significance of a woman’s willingness and ability to refuse to become a male’s object of desire. Instead, the woman opts to recognize herself as a subject. The journey to defying objectification, however, is not easy for Violet. When Violet finds out about Joe’s affair with Dorcas, she falls apart. Her reaction is described in the novel’s first paragraph when the narrator states that Violet, upon learning of the affair, goes “to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face [then] they threw her to the floor and out of the church” (Jazz 3). The narrator meets Violet during her most vulnerable time. At this point, she is not able to differentiate between being an object or subject or even to consider the consequences of cutting the face of a girl who is already dead. She goes from
feeling rage and jealousy toward Dorcas to wanting to look like her in hopes that this will help her get Joe back. After the shock of the affair diminishes, Violet, in an effort to attract Joe’s attention and jealousy, gets a boyfriend and tries to “grow an ass she swore she once owned” (69). She hopes to become the object of Joe’s desire, but Joe is indifferent, as all he does is remember his memories of Dorcas and how “thinking about her as he lay in bed next to Violet was the way he entered sleep ... so that ... the alive love ... will [not] fade ... the way it had with Violet” (28-29). Violet is aware of being invisible to Joe, as the affair was not entirely unexpected. Violet’s suspicions involuntarily slip into her conversation with Joe when she is talking to him about lottery tickets at the grocery store: “Got a mind to double [the eight] with an aught and two or three others just in case who is that pretty girl standing next to you?” (24). The discovery of Joe’s affair with Dorcas comes at an already vulnerable time for Violet. Before Joe even begins his affair, he feels that Violet’s silences “annoy [him], then puzzle him and finally depress him” (24). He tells Malvonne that Violet “takes better care of her parrot than she does me ... I can’t take the quiet. She don’t hardly talk anymore, and I ain’t allowed near her” (49).

Interestingly, Joe states that he “had not chosen [his marriage to Violet]” (Jazz 30), but he was grateful nonetheless for the fact that “he didn’t have to; that Violet did it for him, helping him escape all the redwings in the county and the ripe silence that accompanied them” (30). Moreover, Joe thinks about the fact that he did not choose Violet. He compares the way their relationship began with the way his relationship with Dorcas started. With regards to Dorcas, Joe states that he did not “yearn or pine for the girl, rather he thought about her, and decided. Just as he had decided on his name ... he decided on Dorcas” (29-30). In this respect, he is similar to Violet. While he is the one pursuing Dorcas, Violet was the one who pursued him at the beginning of their relationship. In *The Dance of Intimacy*, Harriet
Lerner explains: “When we are in a distance-pursuer polarity, pursuers are convinced that all they want is more togetherness, and distancers are convinced that all they want is more distance” (257). Person’s argument that a female’s proof of value is connected to a male singling her out does not apply to Violet because she is the one who singles Joe out; she is the pursuer. In *Jazz*, Morrison illustrates different types of romantic relationships (that between Joe and Violet, Joe and Dorcas, Dorcas and Acton) and they all have one aspect in common: one person cares more and this person is the one who is the pursuer when the relationship begins. Joe pursues Dorcas and he wants to please her but he loses her to Acton. Dorcas feels that she has won Acton and she wants to please him but she never actually “wins” him because Acton does not truly care. Violet pursues Joe because she feels that he is meant to be hers since he falls from the tree on her lap but they have a dysfunctional relationship in which Violet experiences “cracks” and Joe cannot stand her silence.

Furthermore, the pursuers in these relationships are the ones attempting to please their partners. Violet tries very hard to please Joe, Joe tries to please Dorcas, Dorcas tries to please Acton. The partners, however, are not responding with the same enthusiasm: despite the fact that Violet seeks to please Joe, it is Dorcas he wishes to please. Similarly, despite the fact that Joe tries to please Dorcas, she wants to please Acton. The imbalance of power in these romantic relationships comes from the lack of negotiation between individuality and commitment to another. While attempting to please their partners, the pursuers are entirely wrapped up in their commitment and as a result, they lose their individuality.

Violet struggles with negotiating between maintaining her individuality and being committed to Joe. The discovery of the affair is not the only time during which Violet “loses” herself. Before “Joe ever laid eyes on the girl, Violet sat down in the middle of the street. She didn’t stumble nor was she pushed: she just sat down” (*Jazz* 17). When she is later caught
trying to steal a baby, she shouts at the bystanders, “Last time I do anybody a favour on this block. Watch your own damn babies!” (22). The affair then is not what makes Violet “lose” herself but it does bring to the surface the problems in Violet and Joe’s marriage. Unlike Dorcas, however, who dies before realizing that she must reconfigure her self in order to have a happy romantic relationship, Violet does realize and achieve this, but the achievement comes with time and reflection. When she feels defeated, Violet goes to Alice Manfred’s house and asks her for a place to “sit down and rest for a minute” (81). Violet does not go to Alice’s house with the intention of reconfiguring her self. She is not aware that she must reconfigure her self. She simply realizes that she is tired and out of options, as is illustrated by the flaw in the question she asks Alice when asked why she would cut an already dead girl: “You wouldn’t fight for your man?” (85). This question resonates the words of Violet’s client from earlier on: “Can’t rival the dead for love. Lose every time” (15). Violet’s question illustrates that she does not have a clear understanding of her situation, as neither cutting the already dead Dorcas nor getting a boyfriend to make Joe jealous nor cooking his favourite foods in order to please him helps to repair her damaged relationship.

It is the reconfiguration of the self, as Morrison phrases it, which repairs her relationship with Joe. Violet achieves this outside of her romantic relationship and with the help of the motherly Alice. Before she can enter into a loving relationship filled with negotiation between individuality and commitment, Violet must reconfigure her self and validate and recognize herself. She must break away from seeking to become the object of Joe’s desire, as is illustrated by her attempt to look like Dorcas, in order to achieve self-recognition, the ability to view and accept herself as subject. At the end of the novel, Violet’s progress from wanting to be an object to being a subject is apparent when she explains to Felice that she “messed up [her] life” (Jazz 208). Admitting and accepting her fault is only
one step, however, because she says that in order to achieve fulfillment after running “up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else” (208), Violet had to kill the part of herself that wished to be the object of desire: “Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her” (209). Who is left is “me,” the “me” who is the woman her “mother didn’t stay around long enough to see ... The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before” (208). By addressing her different “selves,” Violet is hinting at the fluidity of individuality and the importance of a “whole” self, a self that embraces all of the other selves. With reflection and healing, Violet understands that attempting to kill the different facets of self is destructive, whereas healing requires accepting and loving all aspects of oneself in order to integrate all pieces and become whole. Joe’s emotional departure is an impetus for Violet’s reconfiguration of self. Joe is not present in her journey to subjectivity. Rather, she makes the transition from object to subject entirely without Joe and mostly with the help of Alice. As Loris states, Violet recovers a “sense of true self identity” (60) and finds herself through the motherly Alice. Through the example of Violet and Joe’s relationship, Morrison illustrates the difficulty in negotiating between individuality and commitment to another. More importantly, Morrison suggests that before the negotiation can happen, a woman must have a strong sense of self and what is more, she must be able to maintain her individuality when in a romantic relationship. There can be no negotiation when individuality is not present and without individuality, a woman loses herself in her commitment. Violet recovers from having lost herself in her relationship. This is evident when Felice watches Violet and Joe dancing together. Felice describes that Joe “moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing” (214). The playfulness and the dancing, the physical proximity of the couple, demonstrates the successful negotiation between individuality and commitment. This
resonates with Lerner’s idea that “sometimes only after the pursuit cycle is broken can each
party begin to experience the wish we all have for both separateness and togetherness” (257).
After Violet stops pursuing Joe and focuses on herself, she heals, and in turn, reconciles with
Joe.

In *Sula*, Morrison provides the reader with a darker view of romantic relationships.
Unlike in *Jazz*, the reader does not witness a happy ending to any of the romantic
relationships; all the romantic unions in *Sula* fail. De Beauvoir notes the importance of
economic freedom when she explains that women are attached through “residence,
housework, economic condition, and social standing to certain men, fathers or husbands,
more firmly than they are to other women” (28). Morrison also notes the significance of
economic freedom when she explains that female freedom “always means sexual freedom,
even when – especially when – it is seen through the prism of economic freedom” (*Jazz* xiii).
That is to say that a financially independent woman has no need for a man. She can literally
afford to be sexually free because she does not depend on a husband’s income. In *Sula*,
Morrison provides different “claims to personal liberty” (xiii): “Eva’s physical sacrifice for
economic freedom; Nel’s accommodation to the protection marriage promises; Sula’s
resistance to either sacrifice or accommodation[,] Hanna’s claims, [which] are acceptable in
her neighbourhood because they are nonfinancial and nonthreatening” (xiii). The women’s
financial situations are relevant in relation to what Morrison calls their “claims to personal
liberty” (xiii). Eva sacrifices her leg in order to collect insurance money and support her
family, for example. Nel surrenders her agency to Jude for the protection she believes
marriage offers. Sula resists sacrificing herself in a marriage and chooses to survive on Eva’s
financial resources and since Hannah does the same, the community forgives her many
married lovers because she is not depleting their family’s financial resources. Morrison
discusses the importance of financial liberty in *Sula*. Specifically, she illustrates how a significant part of a woman's individuality is financial freedom and, in *Sula*, the more financial independence the female characters have, the less willing are they to negotiate or compromise their independence for the sake of commitment.

Nel, however, proves to be the exception since she gives up her individuality entirely in order to commit to Jude. Nel realizes that greater than her friendship with Sula is the feeling of being needed by Jude, who she believes sees her "singly. She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle" (*Sula* 84). Jude, on the other hand, marries Nel because he wants to feel mature and the dissatisfaction with his job does not allow for this. As a result, it is "rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role ... that made him press Nel about settling down" (82). Additionally, Jude wonders if it is true "what Ajax said ... 'all [women] want, man, is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life'" (83). Ajax's words prove to be true in relation to Nel because Nel is happy to "die," to give up her individuality entirely, for Jude. At first she is indifferent to Jude's hints about marriage but her indifference "disappear[s] altogether when she discovered his pain ... She actually wanted to help, to soothe" (83). Stein points out that chapter "1922," which begins with the girls using sticks to dig holes in the sand, marks the girls' sexual awakening (147). However, this chapter ends with the death of their friend, Chicken Little, who receives his nickname because he is afraid to climb a tree with Nel and Sula. Further, it is Sula who accidentally throws him into the river, as his hands slip from hers as she is spinning him around. It is no coincidence that Chicken Little, the girls' male friend, dies in the chapter that begins with their sexual awakening. As soon as the girls become aware of their sexuality, they kill their male friend. Stein interprets this connection as one of many examples in the
novel where sexual awakening produces death, especially in relation to marriage (147). The language that describes married women is that of death. For example, Nel’s marriage to Jude results in the death of her individuality, as she and Jude together “will make one Jude” (71). After marriage, Nel becomes “one of them ... Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways” (120). Her marriage is “described in the imagery of death” (Stein 147), echoing Ajax’s words. Later on, Morrison describes married women as “folded ... into starched coffins” (122), illustrating that it is not only Nel who “dies” after marriage but also the rest of the married women in Medallion. The word “starch,” a laundry ironing metaphor to describe women in marriages, indicates that society irons women’s personality traits so that they conform into one straight line and all became the same: obedient and dutiful wives.

Marriage provides Nel with a role to fulfill, that of housewife and mother but it is doomed because both she and Jude lack self-worth. Nel fails at her goal to “make certain that no man ever looked at her [as if she were really custard]. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (Sula 22). Jude does exactly this when Nel accidentally interrupts his sexual encounter with Sula. The shock Nel experiences is so astonishing that, when she later analyzes her response to the discovery, she remembers that even when Jude began to talk, she could not “hear because I was worried about you not knowing that your fly was open and scared too because your eyes looked like the soldiers’ that time on the train when my mother turned to custard” (106). Nel does not achieve her goal. Moreover, the man who turns her into custard is her husband, for whom Nel sacrifices her own self-worth. The erosion of Nel’s self-worth begins when she accepts Jude’s offer and agrees to join him in marriage in order to make one Jude. She continues to give up her “self” in “accommodation to the protection marriage promises” (xiii), financial security and a role to fulfill, which includes respectability as defined by the community. When Nel marries Jude,
she is unaware of the emotional turmoil that she will face in the future. The solace she finds in the stereotype of the dutiful wife indicates that she is naïve rather than aware and willing to be an objectified nonentity.

Person’s idea that the romantic quest consists of the female’s value being connected to a male singling her out applies to Nel’s union with Jude. Nel is flattered when Jude begins to single her out among other girls and this resonates with Dorcas’s glee at having “won” Acton. The fact that Jude chooses Nel then becomes proof of her value. This illustrates Nel’s lack of self-definition, as the only value she seeks is from Jude. Nel does not struggle to negotiate between maintaining her individuality and being committed to Jude because she gives up her individuality entirely in order to fulfill the role of his wife. Over the years, Nel’s love for Jude is described as having spun “a steady gray web around her heart” (Sula 95) but Nel defines herself by her wifely duties and leaving Jude is never an option. Nel is entirely passive even when Jude leaves her. After Jude “turns her into custard,” all Nel can do is watch him leave. When she walks in on his and Sula’s sexual encounter, it is not her own dignity she thinks of but his when she says that she wishes she could tell him “privately that you had forgotten to button your fly because I didn’t want to say it in front of her” (106). After Jude leaves, Nel feels that her thighs are “empty and dead too ... And what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now, just walk up and down these rooms? What good are they, Jesus?” (111). Nel feels that she could sacrifice – give up her individuality to fulfill a role – feed the “children ... beat the rugs ... haul the coal up ... be a mule ... plow the furrows with my hands ... hold these rickety walls up with my back if need be” (111) if she can “open [her] legs to some cowboy lean hips but you are trying to tell me no and O my sweet Jesus what kind of cross is that?” (111). Despite questioning why God would allow this to happen to her, Nel continues to fulfill her religious duties, as they are part of her role –
the respectable single mother, or, as Sula puts it, Nel knows “how to behave as the wronged wife” (120). What changes after Jude leaves is the role that Nel plays; the fact that she plays a role does not change. Nel goes from being one of the women “with husbands [who] had folded themselves into starched coffins” (122) to one of the women who had “looked at the world and back at their children ... and Sula knew that one clear young eye was all that kept the knife away from the throat's curve” (122). Nel says that death would be better than Jude leaving her: “Dying was OK because it was sleep” (110) but Nel does not even have the luxury of death because she has to provide for her children. Nel’s situation emphasizes the importance of financial independence discussed by de Beauvoir and Morrison. Although Jude disappears, the consequences of having married him do not. It is when Nel realizes this that she questions the purpose of playing a role and again mentions death when she says, “Are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go ... through these days all the way ... to [the coffin] with never nobody settling down between my legs” (111).

It is not, however, until Eva forces her to accept the fact that she enjoyed watching Chicken Little die followed by crying “circles and circles of sorrow” (174) at Sula’s grave that Nel achieves self-recognition. She admits that “all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude” (Sula 174). While Nel’s words illustrate that she has missed Sula instead, they also suggest that Nel has missed her own self, or rather, having a self, since “a conversation with Sula was like having a conversation with herself” (82). Nel’s friendship with Sula is the closest Nel comes to having a “self.” Morrison portrays Nel and Sula as complementary parts of one whole “self.” In this respect, Nel turns her back on herself when she turns her back on Sula. When Nel marries Jude, she gives up her individuality in order to be committed. When he leaves, she does not reflect to renegotiate her individuality but rather, stays committed to the role she chooses to play. It is not until she cries at Sula’s grave that Nel “reclaims” her
“self,” or at least recognizes that she has given up her individuality.

Sula’s romantic union in the novel is also associated with death. After Ajax leaves her, she comes to the conclusion that “there aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are” (Sula 137). She then lies down on the bed and eventually dies. Unlike Nel’s conventional romance with Jude, however, Sula’s romance with Ajax does not fit Person’s idea of the female’s value being dictated by being singled out by a male. Sula does not lack self-recognition. She thinks that she is Medallion’s “pariah ... knew that [the community] despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men” (122). Moreover, she finds a “hurricane rage of joy” (123) in the “irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power” (123), as the part of sex toward which she looks the most forward is being left to the “postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony” (123). Before she falls in love with Ajax, Sula “knew it would be no other way for her, but she had not counted on the footsteps on the porch, and the beautiful black face that stared at her through the blue-glass window” (124). Her feelings for Ajax surprise both Sula and the reader.

Sula’s relationship with Ajax begins casually. Interestingly, although Sula does not value herself through Ajax singling her out among other females, this is exactly what Ajax does. Ajax’s women fought “murderous battles over him in the streets, brawling thick-thighed women with knives disturbed many a Friday night with their bloodletting and attracted whooping crowds” (Sula 125). Like Sula, who sleeps with men whenever she pleases, Ajax has many women, all of whom fight over him, but it is Sula who arouses his curiosity and he goes to see her “suspecting that this was perhaps the only other woman [other than his mother] whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who
was not interested in nailing him" (127). As for Sula, she is attracted to Ajax because “he talked to her. They had genuine conversations. He did not speak down to her or at her” (127-28). His comfort “at being in her presence ... his refusal to baby or protect her, his assumption that she was both tough and wise ... [and] a generosity of spirit” (128) make Sula care for him. Sula and Ajax’s relationship, unlike Nel and Jude’s, is not founded on insecurity, rage, frustration, possessiveness or the desire to take on a role in order to appear respectable in the eyes of the community. At first, it appears that Sula has no trouble negotiating a balance between her individuality and commitment. With time, however, she begins to crave a conventional relationship with Ajax. Sex with other men is a means of finding herself but making love to Ajax is different from her other experiences. As she makes love to him, she thinks: “I will water your soil ... But how much ... to keep the [soil] moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?” (131). Aside from the erotic tone, this passage illustrates how Sula is negotiating a balance between her individuality and commitment, suggesting that she is aware of the difficulty of achieving this.

Despite her awareness, Sula cannot help but “discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it” (Sula 131). She begins to wonder when Ajax will come. She even stands in front of the mirror “finger-tracing the laugh lines around her mouth and trying to decide whether she was good-looking or not” (131). When Ajax arrives that night, Sula encourages him to “come on. Lean on me” (133). Sula’s desire for possession resembles Nel’s. Ajax’s words that “all women want ... is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life” (83) resonate here. Although Sula does not want to die for Ajax, she does die after he leaves. In wanting a committed relationship with Ajax, Sula succumbs to the societal conventions she has been fighting. When Sula wonders in front
of the mirror about whether she is attractive, she attempts to ease her self-doubt through Ajax's affirmation. Irene McMullin states:

The seeking of affirmation requires abandoning one's sense of self to the vicissitudes of the other person's unconstrained freedom. The jealous person believes that such an important task should be placed only in the hands of a person who can be controlled, thereby ensuring that the identity bestowed through external evaluation can be fully managed and appropriated. The problem, however, is that achieving control over the other person's choices and evaluations would strip him of the very quality that enables him to grant these public dimensions of self—namely, his freedom to see and assess me. (107)

The jealous person is then trapped between wanting to control the beloved's freedom and maintaining it as free. Controlling his freedom may give the illusion of security through his affirmation but the cost of this is that it robs him of this very freedom by violating his trust. Sula's attempt to control Ajax illustrates that she is not entirely above the rules of society and that she is more similar to the women of Bottom than she realizes. Additionally, the similarity is partially due to the very thing that Sula hates – the feminine ideal, which Nel strives to achieve. McMullin argues:

Given that the female ideal is impossible for women to achieve, its prevalence cannot promote anything other than emptiness and despair. When women realize that the fairy-tale picture of love and femininity will not provide them the sense of identity and meaning for which they too yearn, the result can be only a profound sense of loss—a loss that many seek to recoup by attempting to control the beloved. (118)
In relation to this quotation, Sula’s self-doubt in front of the mirror becomes even more significant because she judges her attractiveness through Ajax’s eyes. She does not analyze whether he loves her. Although she believes she is different from the women of Bottom because she is independent since she has not allowed a man to dictate the direction of her life, Sula still stands in front of the mirror and wonders if she is attractive enough for Ajax. While it is true that Sula’s attempt to settle down illustrates that she is not, after all, entirely above the conventions of society, whether Nel and the rest of the community have known what Sula now knows is dubious, as Sula and Ajax’s relationship is different from any of the conventional ones in Medallion. Sula has left Medallion for ten years and when she returns, she is not eager to marry. Her relationship with Ajax begins casually and Sula does not depend on him financially. Similar to the other romantic unions in the novel, however, this relationship also ends with “male desertion, and with a bleak vision of heterosexual femininity as characterized by loss and absence” (Dubey 53). When Ajax senses that Sula wants commitment, he disappears and leaves Sula with “nothing but his stunning absence. An absence so decorative, so ornate, it was difficult for her to understand how she had ever endured, without falling dead or being consumed, [by] his magnificent presence” (134). Ajax’s absence does result in Sula falling dead. No matter how different she is from the rest of Medallion, her romantic expectations end in the same way all the others do – in desertion and loss.

Sula comes from a family of women who are all without men. Male desertion once again leaves a wake of loss and absence. When Boy Boy leaves “in November, Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life” (Sula 32). More importantly, the demands “of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until
she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry” (32).

De Beauvoir’s observation that the relationship between man and woman may resemble that of master and slave in that the man depends for satisfaction upon the woman and the woman depends on him for financial stability, applies to Eva’s situation:

Master and slave, also, are united by a reciprocal need, in this case economic, which does not liberate the slave. In the relation of master to slave the master does not make a point of the need that he has for the other; he has in his grasp the power of satisfying this need through his own action; whereas the slave, in his dependent condition, his hope and fear, is quite conscious of the need he has for his master. Even if the need is at bottom equally urgent for both, it always works in favour of the oppressor and against the oppressed. (29)

The dynamic explained here is similar to that of how the master exploits the slave for the master’s economic profit. The master wishes to convince the slave that slavery is in the latter’s interest under the false pretence that the slave receives protection. With regards to Mississippi between 1882 and 1968, Ta-Nehisi Coates states:

The state’s regime partnered robbery of the franchise with robbery of the purse. Many of Mississippi’s black farmers lived in debt peonage, under the sway of cotton kings who were at once their landlords, their employers, and their primary merchants … A man or woman who protested this arrangement did so at the risk of grave injury or death. Refusing to work meant arrest under vagrancy laws and forced labour under the state’s penal system.

(www.theatlantic.com)

The slave is bound to the master due to financial restraint. In a system of slavery, the slave has no means to survive other than to remain a slave. The master is always in a position of
power because he is able to use the slave as he wishes and furthermore, he can discard the slave. The slave, on the other hand, depends on the master for more than satisfaction. The dependence is based on survival, and as a result, the slave is unable to negotiate. The significance of survival is apparent in Eva’s reaction to Boy Boy’s departure. Unlike the way in which Nel and Sula handle the loss of their men, Eva’s loss is described above in practical and financial terms. Eva does not lie down to die because she does not have the time and energy for anger and sadness, suggesting that having the time and energy for these emotions is a luxury that Nel and Sula take for granted. Sula does not have children and her financial situation is not pressing. Nel has children but she starts to work after Jude leaves and she is able to financially support the remainder of her family; her economic difficulty is not described as urgent as Eva’s. Eva’s chance to reflect upon having failed at negotiating a successful balance between individuality and commitment must be placed on hold so that Eva can ensure the survival of her family by providing for her children. Like Nel’s, Eva’s situation illustrates the consequences of marriage. In this novel, marriage does not result in happy endings. The men have the luxury to leave the marriage when they please, and much like the physical consequences of sexual relations, which result in women carrying the evidence in their pregnant bodies, the physical consequences of marriage are experienced by women: Nel wishes death upon herself, Sula actually dies and Eva sacrifices a limb in order to feed her children. Meanwhile, Jude has an affair then leaves and is never heard from again. Ajax senses commitment and disappears and Boy Boy “takes off after five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage” (32), during which time he “did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (32). This is perhaps why Eva postpones her anger for two years. Unlike Nel, who successfully lies to herself about playing a role in marriage since Jude played along with her, Eva is aware of Boy Boy’s ways
and despite sacrificing her body for economic freedom, she realizes that it is “hating him that kept her alive and happy ... after Boy Boy’s visit she began her retreat to her bedroom” (37). Like Nel and Sula, Eva is also permanently affected by the loss of her husband, and not only physically but also apparently emotionally. Her retreat to her bedroom illustrates her sadness. Her reconfiguration of self, however, involves securing economic freedom, and as a result, her individuality as head of the household is intact.

The only woman who is not affected by the loss of a man is Hannah. After Rekus dies when Sula is only three years old, Hannah chooses to move back into her mother’s house, “prepared to take care of it and her mother forever” (Sula 41). Hannah does not feel obligated but chooses to nurture her mother in this way. Her options are limited but present. That she remains in Eva’s household illustrates her choice. In this way, Hannah’s life is different from the other women’s in that she is a widow, and therefore, she is affected by her status, as she lives with her mother for the rest of her life. Unlike the other women, however, Hannah is not abandoned by her husband and left heartbroken or with the urgency of providing for a family. What she wants after her husband dies is some male company and she “fuck[s] practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment. So she ended up a daylight lover” (43-44). In choosing not to remarry or be in a committed relationship, Hannah expresses her contentment with her sexual, as well as financial arrangement. Further, Hannah’s arrangement suggests that her sexual freedom makes her happy, especially because she does not need to be in a marriage and be provided for financially. What is more, the women of the community dislike her but Hannah’s claims are still “acceptable in her neighbourhood because they are nonfinancial and nonthreatening” (Morrison xiii). What threatens the neighbourhood women is a woman who might marry their husbands or spend their money, and jeopardize their financial status. Hannah is
important because she is tolerated by the women of the community, who accept her as long as she does not deplete their financial resources. This, in turn, illustrates that the main reason the women of the neighbourhood remain in their marriages is financial security and not romantic love. This is perhaps the reason why Hannah never remarries: she is financially secure and she gets “everyday touching” (44), which is no less than what the married women are getting.

In *Beloved*, Sethe lacks self-recognition. She is unable to negotiate a balance between her individuality and her commitment to Paul D because guilt consumes her. When she realizes that Beloved is the daughter she killed returned from the dead, she dedicates herself entirely to her. Barbara Schapiro states that the scene after Paul D leaves and Sethe takes Denver and Beloved ice-skating illustrates Sethe’s lack of self-recognition. The narration emphasizes that “nobody saw them falling” (*Beloved* 205) while skating; every action the girls make – skating, falling, attempting to stand up and finally walking home – is followed by “nobody saw them falling” (205-06). When Sethe falls and realizes that nobody sees her falling, she cries. Paul D’s presence has brought “a few months of the sun-splashed life ... tentative greetings from other coloured-people in Paul D’s company; a bed life for herself” (204). When he is gone, she feels sorry for herself, as she wonders if this is “the pattern ... Every eighteen or twenty years her unlivable life would be interrupted by a short-lived glory?” (204). When Paul D leaves, he takes with him any hopes of a happy life for Sethe. What is significant to note is that Sethe mourns the loss of the “tentative greetings from other coloured-people in Paul D’s company” (204). This illustrates that Sethe relied on Paul D not only for comfort and company but also, for acceptance from the community. Sethe does not believe that she can fit in without Paul D since the community has shunned her and people only begin to acknowledge her again when they see her with Paul D. Sethe sees herself as
what de Beauvoir calls “the inessential which never becomes the essential” (26), the one less important in the relationship with Paul D. She believes that the community views him as the Subject, the Absolute and her as Other. She compares Paul D to the rest of the community with regards to his reaction to the murder of her own child: “She should have known that he would behave like everybody else in town once he knew” (204). After this comparison, however, she goes on to lament the loss of the “twenty-eight days of having women friends, a mother-in-law, and all her children together; of being part of a neighbourhood ... all that was long gone and would never come back” (204). The “twenty-eight days” illustrates that Sethe cherished every one of those days as part of the community and now she laments not only the loss of Paul D but also, and more importantly, the loss of the hope that his presence would reunite her with the community. Sethe does not believe that the community wants to befriend her. She defines her relation to the community in relation to Paul. She believes that people dislike her and like Paul and that Paul’s approval will convince the community that Sethe is worthy of their friendship. Rather than define her own relation to the community, Sethe needs Paul to do it for her.

When Sethe, Denver and Beloved fall on the ice, Sethe rises “to her hands and knees, laughter still shaking her chest, making her eyes wet. She stayed that way for a while, on all fours. But when her laughter died, the tears did not ...” (Beloved 206). The emphasis of staying “on all fours” resonates Paul D’s words to Sethe: “You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (194). When Paul tells Sethe that she has two feet, he is reminding her not to be a passive victim, but rather to take charge of her own situation and change it. He is encouraging her to let go of her past in order to move forward. When Sethe says “so long” (195) to Paul D, she “murmured [the words] from the far side of the trees” (195) since from the moment Paul D utters these words, a “forest was locking the distance between them, giving it shape and heft”
Paul D’s words hurt Sethe because they interfere with the idea of mutual recognition in romantic unions. When he calls her an animal, Sethe feels like an object, as she did when “they took my milk like I was a cow” (20). Being owned like an animal is what Sethe “saved” Beloved from by killing her and so when Paul tells her that she had a choice because she has “two feet ... not four” (194), Sethe thinks that Paul is just like the rest of the community, who does not understand the sacrifice she made in order to “save” her children from Schoolteacher.

The fact that Sethe stays on all fours when she falls foreshadows the “thick love” that follows after she discovers Beloved’s identity. Schapiro explains that since there is no other to “confer the reality of her own existence on her, Sethe falls prey to a consuming narcissism” (Beloved 204) and retreats from “external reality and succumbs to her destructive, narcissistic fantasies, to her murderously enraged child-self as well as her insatiable need to make reparation for her murderous love” (204). Sethe now feels that “there is no world outside” her door (184) and she no longer leaves house 124, a number that signals the absence of number three, Beloved. When Beloved returns home, Sethe no longer feels the need to leave the house. What follows is the “too thick love” that Paul D accuses her of having. She and Beloved remain at home. She cooks for Beloved, who becomes fat and yet her hunger for food, much like her hunger for love, is insatiable. Beloved wants all of Sethe’s love and Sethe is consumed by the desire to make reparation for what she has done. Sethe continues to give up her individuality in order to commit wholly to mend her past mistake, or what she believes will mend her past mistake. She stops caring for herself and lives only to please Beloved until the community women come to chase the girl away. The fact that the community women are the ones who help Sethe is significant because it illustrates that the reconfiguration of Sethe’s self happens outside of her romantic union with
Paul D. His departure is essential because his presence is an obstacle that has to be removed for reconfiguration to succeed since Sethe depends on him for acceptance from the community. Additionally, although it is Paul D in the end who helps Sethe see that she is “[her] own best thing” (322), this would not be possible without the removal of Beloved from 124. More importantly, that the women come to help Sethe demonstrates that Sethe was wrong to assume that she needed Paul D in order for the community to accept her. By coming to 124 to chase Beloved away, the women show that they care about Sethe even though Paul D is no longer with her. Because Sethe’s identity is entirely tied to the way she serves Beloved, however, she lies down in Baby Suggs’s bed after Beloved leaves and does not get up anymore. That Sethe lies down in the bed where Baby died may well remind some readers of Sula lying down to die after Ajax leaves. The difference is that Sethe is not lying down to die because Paul D left, but rather because Beloved left. This is a crucial difference between Sethe and Sula but what their scenarios have in common is that they see that the people who leave them take away their respective identities. That is to say, by sacrificing her essential self and demanding a conventional relationship from Ajax, Sula gives up her individuality. Similarly, Sethe gives up everything, including her identity, for the chance to make amends for her murder of Beloved. Sethe has defined herself and her life in relation to her child. She carries with her the guilt of having murdered Beloved, a guilt that prevents her from forgiving herself and moving forward.

What is important to note and what sets Sethe and Paul D’s relationship apart from the romantic relationships in Jazz and Sula is that Paul D helps Sethe to reconfigure herself. When he goes back to 124, he hears someone “humming a tune. Something soft and sweet, like a lullaby. Then a few words” (Beloved 319) and then he sees Sethe, lying down on Baby Suggs’s bed, her hair “spreads and curves on the pillow. Her eyes, fixed on the window, are
so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is. There is too much light... Things
look sold” (319). When he understands that Sethe has given up, he says to her: “Don’t you
die on me! This is Baby Suggs’ bed! ... You got to get up from here, girl” (320). He offers to
help Sethe heal when he tells her: “Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I’m a
take care of you, you hear? Starting now” (320). When Sethe asks if he is going to count her
feet, he responds by telling her that he will “rub [her] feet” (321). By asking if he is going to
count her feet, Sethe is letting Paul D know that she is still hurt by his comment. By
correcting her, Paul D is apologizing, or rather, he is suggesting that what he thinks of her
action does not affect his desire to take care of her. By caring for Sethe physically – heating
up water to give her a bath – Paul D begins to heal her emotionally. It is difficult not to
associate this scene with the one in which Amy Denver rubs Sethe’s feet, therefore giving her
courage and emotional healing through physical care. Paul D exhibits traits of friendship and
love and, in so doing, calls into question gender stereotypes of men as insensitive. Sethe sees
in him the “blessedness, that has made him someone] who can walk in a house and make the
women cry. Because with him ... they could. Cry and tell him things they only told each
other” (321). It is only after Sethe realizes that she can talk to him as she can talk to a female
friend that Sethe finally opens up and cries to him in lament, “[Beloved] left me ... She was
my best thing” (321). She tells him about all her hurt, including that she called after her sons,
but they walked “on down the railroad track and couldn’t hear her; that Amy was scared to
stay with her because her feet were ugly and her back looked so bad; that her ma’am had hurt
her feelings” (321). It is after this list of painful experiences that Sethe speaks the most
painful one out loud to Paul D and says that Beloved left her.

In response, Paul D assumes a nurturing role by calling Sethe “baby,” holding her and
providing physical comfort, as well as telling her: “You your best thing, Sethe. You are”
Schapiro explains that Paul D has the power “to satisfy the craving... to be ‘known’, to have one’s existence sanctioned by the empathic recognition of the other” (205) and that while the word “thing” “still suggests a sense of self as object, the scene between [them]... comes closest to that state of mutual recognition” (207). She stresses that the relationship here “is not one of merging (as Jude and Nel’s) or of domination (as Dorcas and Acton’s) but of resonating ‘likeness’ and empathic understanding” (207). What illustrates this is that Paul D recalls Sixo’s words about the Thirty-Mile Woman: “‘She is a friend of my mind... The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It’s good... when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind’” (321). This suggests that Paul D thinks of Sethe as a woman who is a “friend of his mind,” “the ‘other’ [as] a subject in its own right, with an inner life that corresponds with that of the self” (Schapiro 208). He “wants to put his story next to hers” (322). The phrasing of his realization is significant because it illustrates that the relationship between Paul D and Sethe will not be one of domination, as he does not want to merge her story with his, but rather he wants to put his own next to hers. Their relationship will be one of mutual recognition and co-existence.

Significantly, the last words of this conversation are Sethe’s after Paul D tells her that she is her own best thing and she responds by asking him, “Me? Me?” (Beloved 322). Sethe’s words resonate Violet’s when she is explaining the process of self-recognition to Felice by saying: “what was left was me” (Jazz 209). The importance of “me,” of self-recognition, is a theme that is discussed in all romantic relationships in these three novels but what sets Sethe apart is that the words that describe her self-recognition are questions. At the end of the novel, Sethe is just beginning to recognize herself as subject, as someone other than the mother who killed her baby to save her from enslavement. More importantly, unlike the men in the other romantic unions, Paul D plays a crucial role in Sethe’s ability to recognize herself
as subject. Although it is the neighbourhood women who chase Beloved away, it is Paul D who helps Sethe heal from her emotional and physical pain. The importance of Paul D in this process is undeniable, as he introduces Sethe to the idea that she is her “own best thing” (322), suggesting that in order to claim back her individuality, she must let go of her guilt. In order to make a romantic relationship with Paul D work, Sethe needs to reconfigure herself, and this she must do on her own.

When discussing the reconfiguration of women’s selves in the framework of romantic relationships with men, in all three novels, men must depart in order for this to succeed. In *Sula*, Morrison portrays a dark view of romantic relationships, as Ajax’s departure results in death and Jude’s results in hardship for Nel. In both cases, however, the men’s departure is essential for the women, as Sula somewhat understands the pain that she has caused her friend, and Nel uses Jude’s absence to understand that it is not her husband she misses, but Sula, to whom she is more similar than she assumed. Contrarily, with the exception of Dorcas, *Jazz* and *Beloved* depict romantic relationships that end successfully, although the men’s departure remains necessary for the women to reconfigure themselves on their terms.
Chapter 3: Tracing Ancestry and Healing

In Morrison's fiction, emotional healing through the process of "re-memoration," the tracing of one's ancestry, signals an ancestral presence, which Jennings explains as "the descending continuum of eldership known as kanda; the living-dead ancestor – the timeless people of West and Central African traditional cosmologies, the elders" (83). Further, the ancestor is closely tied to the living elder. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison even refers to the living-dead ancestor and the living elder as interchangeable, as the two play a "hybrid role ... the living-dead ancestor followed by the elder, to mediate and naturalize the activities of the metaphysical in the physical realm" (Jennings 86). In all three novels, the way in which characters relate to the notion of the ancestor affects their personal and interpersonal relationships. The ancestor is an elder who is "always ... there. And these ancestors are not just present, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Evans 343), achieving this through the presence of the elder. The importance of the elder extends beyond wisdom to be that of a presence that benevolutely guides its descendants by teaching them their history, bringing them close to their roots. In many of Morrison's novels, a relationship with the elders brings the characters closer to a connection with their ancestors.

This is especially the case in *Sula*, where the characters do not relate directly to the ancestors but rather, through the elder. Unlike in *Jazz* and *Beloved*, where the presence of the ancestor is more emphasized and direct, in *Sula*, there is no direct ancestor presence. Rather, in its place stands the almost mythical Eva, the elder who reigns above her family and community and directs the lives of those around her. Janice Sokoloff notes that Eva's is a
name that “mythically implies the ancestral mother of us all” (430) and that she is the shaping force in the formation of Sula’s identity. Eva’s force extends beyond the shaping of Sula’s identity to directing “the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders” (Sula 30). She takes in the three boys who seemingly have nothing in common other than that they are homeless and gives them the same name. As a result, the boys become “a trinity with a plural name … inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves … they spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy” (38-39). When questioned why she decided to call the boys the same name, Eva replies, “They’s all deweys” (38) perhaps hinting to their shared fate of abandonment. Whatever the reason, Eva shapes the boys’ identities by forcing them to share the same name. Their families have abandoned the Deweys. As a result, the boys are all isolated from their own biological ancestors. By assigning them the same name, which essentially signifies a similar if not the same identity, Eva exerts her matriarchal power early on in the novel.

As with the Deweys, Eva plays God with her own son, Plum, when she disagrees with his choices and, as a result, she kills him. Eva shows no regret and she is not ever questioned about Plum’s fate, not even by Hannah, who does not speak when she meets her mother’s gaze and realizes what has happened, “for the eyes of each were enough for the other” (Sula 48). Hannah understands that Eva has set Plum on fire and Eva is aware of Hannah’s understanding and yet the subject of Plum’s death is never discussed; Hannah does not dare to question her mother. When it comes to Hannah’s burning, however, Eva throws herself out of the window in order to put out the fire with her own body. This kind of maternal devotion to her children illustrates Eva’s protectiveness toward her family. Eva serves as a leader not only within her own family but also within the Bottom community. Eva becomes almost a
mythical being while also gaining the respect and admiration of the community when she leaves her children in the care of neighbours only to return a few months later with a missing leg and with enough money to support her family for years to come. The reader and the Bottom community do not find out whether the rumour that Eva deliberately amputated her leg in order to collect insurance is true and the mystery and uncertainty only increase her power. Eva is the matriarch of the family, although this term must be used cautiously. In *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, hooks explains that the idea of black women as matriarchs ignores the profound traumas many black women have experienced (80). During slavery, for example, black women had no control of their social and political lives, or even over their own bodies. To justify this, colonizers used an oppressive tactic, the myth that “all black women were sexually loose as a way to devalue black womanhood” (hooks 80). Similarly, white colonizers attempt to brainwash black women by convincing them that despite being “economically oppressed and victimized by sexism and racism” (80), they are matriarchs. The term glorifies the “matriarch’s” role in the family without acknowledging the involuntary conditions in which the black woman finds herself.

Eva acquires her “reigning” status only because Boy Boy abandoned her and in order to reign, or even survive, she had to cut off her leg. Her rule relates to the central role she plays in her community and Sula stands opposite to everything that Eva embodies. Eva embraces her community and enjoys playing a crucial role in the lives of its members. In addition to taking in the Deweys, she directs the lives of her boarders. With the newlywed brides, she fusses “for not getting their men’s supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them” (*Sula* 42) and when dinner should be ready for their husbands, as illustrated when she asks them judgmentally, “Yo’ man be here direc’lin. Ain’t it ‘bout time you got busy?” (42). When it comes to her own love for men, Eva, had “a regular flock of
gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter” (41). Her “gentleman callers” respect Eva and enjoy seeing “the joy in her face as they settled down to play checkers, knowing that even when she beat them, as she almost always did, somehow, in her presence, it was they who had won something” (41). Even though Eva does not remarry, she remains an influential figure in the Bottom community. Her “reign” is complete on her own, without a man.

Sula does not view Eva’s “reign” and her blood ties to her grandmother as a reason to respect her elder. When she accuses Eva of having intentionally amputated her leg, the latter responds by calling her a liar and saying, “Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land thy God giveth thee” (Sula 93). This sentence foreshadows Sula’s early death and relates closely to Morrison’s idea that “when you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself” (Taylor-Guthrie 184). Moreover, her response to Eva’s quotation from the Bible and their heated conversation emphasizes Sula’s disrespect for her maternal ancestor.

Sula feels no remorse about hurting Eva’s feelings:

‘Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days wasn’t too long.’

‘Pus mouth! God’s going to strike you!’

‘Which God? The one watched you bum Plum?’

‘Don’t talk to me about no burning. You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!’

‘But I ain’t. Got that? I ain’t. Any more fires in this house, I’m lighting them!’ (93)

Additional to the confrontational and angry manner in which she speaks to Eva, Sula shows further disrespect when she says to Eva: “I ain’t never going to need you” (94). During this rebellious conversation, Sula disregards the sacrifice that Eva has made in order to support
her family, which includes Sula. Without Eva’s help, Hannah and the then young Sula would have nowhere to turn. In the heat of the moment, Sula forgets – or neglects – the fact that if Eva intentionally amputated her own leg, she did so to support her family. She expresses no gratitude and is quick to conclude that she will never need Eva and does not pause to reflect how this statement may affect her grandmother.

Morrison states that, in her fiction, she wishes to point out that nice things “don’t always happen to the totally self reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (Taylor-Guthrie 344). She declares that she is bewildered by girls who have grown up like “they never had any grandmothers. Or if they had them, they didn’t pay any attention to them” (Taylor-Guthrie 344). Her words are easily applicable to Sula’s fate. Sula despises the cultural information she has received from Eva and intentionally goes against Eva’s lessons. Even when she goes against them, however, Sula does follow Eva’s advice to a certain extent. Sula sleeps with men and does not serve or worship them as Eva has taught the community women to do. Her brief relationship with Ajax, however, changes this and makes Sula eager to settle into a loving relationship with him. She even cleans the house, cooks for him and waits for him to come to her. To Eva’s significant role in the community Sula responds by shunning out Bottom altogether. In this way, she helps the community by aiding others to define themselves and as a result, becomes an important – although not loved or respected – part of the community.

Also similar to Eva, who cuts off her own leg to provide for her family, Sula cuts off her own finger to protect herself and Nel from the boys who are bullying them. Although the two differ in that Eva’s priority is her family, whereas Sula’s loyalty is to her friend, their method of protection is the same: amputating parts of themselves for the protection of those they love. They also find themselves in similar situations in that their actions result in the
deaths of Plum and Chicken Little. Their intentions, however, differ greatly and the
difference is crucial. Sokoloff notes that while Eva’s murder of Plum is “deliberate and
premeditated [and] fills her with ‘desolation and mourning’” (432), Sula’s “inadvertent and
undiscovered murder of Chicken Little ... gives her a sense of being ‘exempt from
responsibility’” (432). Their reaction to the murders is similar in that neither experiences
guilt or remorse. Despite the fact that Sula wants to go against Eva’s teachings, there are
parallels to be drawn between the two and Sula is undeniably shaped by the matriarch of her
family, even if only by rebelling against her. Sokoloff argues that the powerful personalities
share remarkable energy and that where they differ is that “the vitality Eva has spent a life
time investing in endurance, Sula redirects into defiance” (433). This becomes an important
point in relation to Sula’s decision to cast Eva out of her own home.

O’Reilly examines that in Morrison’s fiction, the mother line signifies “the ancient
properties of traditional black womanhood and ancestral memory” (35). That it is the mother
line that signifies ancestral memory is crucial, as this is seen in all three novels. There is a
matriarch present in each and the characters’ relationships with these matriarchs, and in turn,
with the ancestors, determine the emotional well being of the characters. Sula shuns the
ancestor by going against Eva. She even goes as far as putting Eva out of her own house and
into a nursing home. When Nel questions her decision, Sula responds by saying, “All I know
is I’m scared. And there’s no place else for me to go. We all that’s left, Eva and me. I guess I
should have stayed gone. I didn’t know what else to do” (Sula 101). Sula states that the
reason why she is afraid of Eva is that she killed Plum and she may kill Sula as well but she
does not explain why she decides to keep Eva’s house to herself instead of moving out and
letting Eva stay there. Sokoloff argues that Sula turns into defiance the “vitality Eva has
spent a life time investing in endurance” (433). She says that there is nowhere else for her to
go, which illustrates that she still thinks of Eva’s house as home. Sula even spends her last days in Eva’s bed and yet she is too defiant to let Eva remain in her own home. In the end, Sula dies in Eva’s bed and Eva thinks of Sula in her last days, as illustrated by her calling Nel Sula and by confronting Nel about the incident of Chicken Little’s death and pointing out her similarity to Sula. Sokoloff argues that Morrison creates a “matriarchal community in which the ancestor becomes the source of vitality and truth telling that, in the end, permits her progeny to prevail” (434). Although Sula’s killing of the ancestor results in her literal death, her connection to the world lives through Nel and it is Eva’s last words to her that make this possible.

It is not only Sula who is shaped by these matriarchal lines but also Nel. Morrison goes to great lengths to illustrate how matriarchal lines “of temperamental inheritance shape her female characters … Nel’s presentation is woven into four generations of women” (Sokoloff 430). Her grandmother, who is very strict with her in order to protect her from the fate of her daughter, a prostitute, raises Nel’s mother, Helene. Helene, in reaction against her mother, builds a conventional family. In turn, Nel finds in unconventional Sula the “expression of the otherwise muted parts of her personality, parts of herself that … derive from the maternal ancestor: her grandmother, the Creole madam, who, like Sula, is sensuous and independent” (Sokoloff 431). The presence of these relations is apparent as Helene’s grandmother worries that Helene will be like her mother. Similarly, Helene worries that Nel will take after her grandmother. Going against the maternal ancestor is significant. Even when Helene follows convention, she does so in order to go against her own rebellious mother. Similar to the fate predicted by Morrison when she says that those who kill the ancestor kill themselves, neither Sula nor Nel live particularly happy or fulfilled lives. Sula dies and Nel makes great sacrifices to raise her children alone and lonely. Significantly, it is
when Nel embraces the truth after being confronted by Eva’s words, the words of Sula’s maternal ancestor, that she reaches some peace within herself and begins to heal emotionally. Eva tells Nel that she is just like Sula and that, like her friend, she curiously watched Chicken Little drown — and enjoyed doing so — without caring to save him. It is only after accepting this truth that Nel cries at Sula’s grave and admits missing her. It is the maternal ancestor, albeit not her own, that makes this self-awareness possible.

In *Jazz*, Morrison introduces the ancestors by tracing the distress of the major characters. When disconnected from their ancestors, the characters turn not only on themselves but also on each other and it is only after searching for their true ancestors that they are able to mature emotionally and overcome their distress. In *Jazz*, Morrison introduces an elder, True Belle, who is removed from her family. Upon her return several years later, she demonstrates her love for Golden Gray, a boy who she helped raise but to whom she is not related by blood. True Belle’s stories of the glorious Golden Gray demonstrate to Rose that her mother does not hate this boy “who took her from her own daughters years ago. The stories tell her, as they did with Violet, that this boy has claimed her mother’s heart; he, not she, is the beloved child” (O’Reilly 371). The narrator says of True Belle’s love for Golden Gray:

True Belle … filled Violet’s head with stories about her white lady and the light of both their lives — a beautiful young man whose name, for obvious reasons, was Golden Gray. Gray because that was Vera Louise’s last name (much, much later it was also the color of his eyes), and Golden because after the pink birth-skin disappeared along with the down on his head, his flesh was radiantly golden, and floppy yellow curls covered his head and the lobes of his ears. It was nowhere as blond as Vera Louise’s hair once was, but its sunlight
color, its determined curliness, endeared him to her. Not all at once. It took a while. But True Belle laughed out loud the minute she laid eyes on him and thereafter every day for eighteen years. (139)

The amount of details that fill True Belle’s description of Golden Gray illustrate her endearment for the boy. The way in which she describes his “golden flesh” (139) and “floppy yellow curls covering his head and the lobes of his ears” (139) demonstrate an attention to detail that resembles that of a loving grandmother. What is more, the comparison of Golden Gray’s hair with that of his mother’s – “It was nowhere as blond as Vera Louise’s hair once was” (139) – emphasizes the extent of True Belle’s knowledge of both children as if she is Vera Louise’s mother and Golden Gray’s grandmother. After all, the amount of detail and attention given to comparing the extent of gold in mother and child’s locks resembles that of an endearing grandmother. True Belle “laughed out loud the minute she laid eyes on him and thereafter every day for eighteen years” (139), demonstrating that despite being forced away from her own family in order to raise Golden Gray, she loves the boy and does not resent him. Her happiness with Golden Gray is further emphasized when the narrator states that the boy lived in “complete indulgence by True Belle, who, laughing, laughing, fed him test cakes and picked every single seed from the melon before she let him eat it” (140).

Morrison explores the impact that ancestors have in the construction of the characters’ identities:

[Grandparents and ancestors] are DNA; it’s where you get your information, your cultural information. Also, it’s your protection, it’s your education. They were responsible for us, and we have to be responsible to them ... You can’t just take. Our ancestors are part of that circle, an ever widening circle, one hopes. And if you ignore that, you put yourself in a spiritually dangerous
position of being self-sufficient, of having no group that you're dependent on. (Taylor-Guthrie 238)

The ancestor in *Jazz* differs from the ancestor in *Sula*, as Eva is responsible for her family and, in turn, she expects her family to be responsible to her. As stated above, Eva directly addresses the issue of “taking” and selfishness with Sula, which is what leads to the eventual demise of their relationship. Unlike Eva, True Belle is not entirely responsible for her family, or at least not for the eighteen years during which she served Golden Gray’s mother, and therefore, the family is not responsible to her. As a result, unlike Sula, who defies Eva and willingly enters the dangerous position of self-sufficiency, True Belle’s family has no choice but to be self-reliant after she leaves. True Belle also has no choice but to abandon her family. She has no freedom and, as a slave, she must follow Vera Louise. True Belle asks her sister to look after her husband and two daughters and the narrator says of her departure: “Vera Louise might help her buy them all out with paper money … maybe not. Maybe she frowned as she sat in the baggage car … Maybe she felt bad. Anyway, choiceless, she went” (*Jazz* 142). True Belle’s lack of freedom and choice is apparent and what demonstrates her devotion to her own family is that she returns as soon as Golden Gray leaves his household at eighteen years of age. Her strength is emphasized when she “convinced herself and her mistress she was dying” (143) and was able to “answer Rose Dear’s pleas by coming back … She rented a small house, bought a cookstove for it and delighted the girls with descriptions of life with the wonderful Golden Gray” (143). In order to leave, she must convince her owner that she is dying. In succeeding to convince Vera Louise, True Belle illustrates her determination and love for her own family. While it is undeniable that True Belle cares for Golden Gray, her endearing stories about him also illustrate that he is everything her life consisted of for eighteen years. As a result, she has no other stories to share with her family.
Talking about Golden Gray allows True Belle to shift the focus away from her own life lived in his servitude and perhaps helps her to cope with how much she missed her own daughters throughout these years. In showing this kind of strength, True Belle resembles Eva’s determination never to talk about her missing leg. Matters that the matriarchs of the family do not mention are as important as those that are discussed.

Rose Dear loses her mother at eight years old. After her husband abandons her and their children, she loses her will to live. When True Belle finally returns, she finds the “sad little family [disposed of house and land] … living secretly in an abandoned shack some neighbours had located for them and eating what food [they] were able to share and the girls forage” (Jazz 138). With both the matriarch and the provider removed, Rose Dear is unable to support her family. Eventually, she commits suicide. Since Violet’s father is absent and her mother is unable to support the family financially or emotionally and eventually ends her own life, Violet is entirely cut off from her ancestors. After True Belle returns, Violet is full of stories about the beloved blond boy her grandmother raised. All of these factors contribute to her inability to cope with her adult life.

As discussed in chapter one, it is significant that Alice plays the role of mother in her friendship with Violet, as Violet must reconcile her resentment toward True Belle and Rose Dear before she can fully embrace herself just as she is. After Alice frustratingly cries, “Oh, mama” (Jazz 110), she says to Violet: “Give me that coat. I can’t look at that lining another minute” (110). This moment marks a change in their relationship from Alice merely tolerating Violet’s visits to her claiming the responsibility to “become mother” to Violet and help “repair the seams.” It is through this mothering friendship that Violet is able to connect again with her ancestors and accept her mother’s actions in order to move forward and heal. She is able finally to understand why her own mother failed at mothering. In her article, “In
Search of My Mother’s Garden, I Found My Own: Mother-Love, Healing, and Identity in Toni Morrison’s Jazz,” O’Reilly argues that Violet experiences what Nancy Chodorow calls the “reproduction of motherlessness” (371):

[She] realizes that, just as she was psychologically unprepared for mothering, having not been mothered herself, Rose could not be a mother because she had never been a daughter. Violet’s recognition of her own mother’s missed mothering allows for a daughter-to-daughter identification which, in turn, strengthens the mother-daughter bond. (371)

In order for Violet to recognize her own mother’s missed mothering, she has to “play daughter” to Alice to realize that it takes a mother figure like her to “repair the seams.” By reflecting on Alice’s importance, she realizes that her mother’s inability to mother is no longer unforgivable in the absence of such a figure in her own life.

Morrison’s explanation that when you kill the ancestor, you kill yourself, relates to the ancestors of Jazz in a way that is different from her depiction of ancestors in Sula. Whereas Sula chooses to defy her ancestor, Rose Dear and Violet are forcefully removed from theirs. Cut off from her own mother, Rose Dear’s fate is similar to Sula’s in that both characters die. Through their deaths, Morrison illustrates that whether voluntary or involuntary, being cut off from the ancestor results in death. In the case of Sula and Rose Dear, it is a literal death, whereas Violet’s is a figurative death, evident when she knocks on Alice’s door. She tries to cut the already dead Dorcas, attempts to steal a neighbour’s baby and often finds herself slipping through the cracks. Her question to Alice, “Where the grown people? Is it us?” (Jazz 110), illustrates her need to connect with the ancestor, to repair, or construct, a relationship that slavery prevented her from having. After Alice repairs her “seams” and Violet is able finally to understand and forgive her mother’s inability to mother,
she is able to mature emotionally. When she tells Felice that she forgot her life was hers and that she “just ran up and down the streets wishing I was somebody else ... White. Light. Young again” (208), she demonstrates her awareness of having been wrong about basing her self-esteem on her grandmother’s stories of a white boy. She states that True Belle fed her stories “about a little blond child ... He lived inside my mind. Quiet as a mole. But I didn’t know it till I got here. The two of us. Had to get rid of it” (208). After she understands that she cannot and should not want to be like Golden Gray, Violet forgives her mother and grandmother. This is evident when she tells Felice that now she wants to be “the woman my mother didn’t stay around long enough to see ... The one she would have liked and the one I used to like before” (209).

As a result of reaching emotional maturity through reconnecting with her ancestors, Violet is “play[ing] mother” to Felice similar to the way Alice is “playing mother” to Violet. Thanks to her conversations with Violet, Felice is able to understand finally the significance of her lost ring that Dorcas was wearing when she was buried. Felice says:

I wanted the ring back not just because my mother asks me have I found it yet. It’s beautiful. But although it belongs to me, it’s not mine. I love it, but there’s a trick in it, and I have to agree to the trick to say it’s mine. Reminds me of the tricky blond kid living inside Mrs. Trace’s head. A present taken from whitefolks, given to me when I was too young to say No thank you. (211)

Thanks to Violet, Felice achieves what Dorcas never did – the ability to accept and love herself just as she is without wishing that she were white or light. She no longer regrets losing her ring, as its existence reminds her of a time when she had to accept a gift from “whitefolks.” In teaching her this lesson, Violet takes the role of the matriarch despite the fact that Felice is not her own daughter. Through connecting with their ancestors, Violet and
Felice achieve self-recovery through recovering their history, a process that hooks refers to as “enabl[ing] us to see ourselves as if for the first time, for our field of vision is no longer shaped and determined solely by the condition of domination” (*Talking Back* 31). By not regretting the loss of her ring, Felice figuratively rejects beauty as defined by “whitefolks” and Violet’s emotional healing and ability to “play mother” to Felice indicates the same.

In *Beloved*, the haunting of house 124 family members turns into a haunting of the entire community and Beloved’s return forces her family into a process of re-memoration. The characters must confront their ancestral stories to heal and reach emotional maturity.

Baby Suggs, the matriarch in *Beloved*, is in a similar situation to True Belle. Both are slaves and neither is in a position to negotiate her own freedom. Jennifer Holden-Kirwan notes that in captivity, Baby Suggs knows nothing about herself, not even “what she looks like” (141) and therefore, when Halle purchases her freedom, she must become acquainted with herself, with a “self that was no self” (140). The narrator states of Baby Suggs:

> In all of Baby’s life ... men and women were moved around like checkers.
> Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby’s eight children had six fathers ...
> Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye. To make up for coupling with a straw boss for four months in exchange for keeping her third child, a boy, with her – only to have him traded for lumber in the spring of the next year and to find herself pregnant by the man who promised not to and did. That child she could not love and the rest she would
Baby Suggs, the matriarch of her family and the woman who later becomes an important ancestor, resorts to making decisions about which one of her children to love since it is not often that she has the luxury to keep them. She refers to the twenty years she spends with Halle as a lifetime because in comparison to the amount of time she had with her girls, who were taken away before getting their adult teeth, twenty years feels like a lifetime. Because she is able to keep Halle for twenty years and since he is one of the children she has allowed herself to love, Baby Suggs becomes a crucial part of the family Halle builds with Sethe. Despite the fact that she has eight children, only Halle “sticks” and it is only his family that she is able to be a part of, and in which she can be a matriarch.

According to Morrison’s explanation of the ancestor as an elder who is always present, protective and providing benevolence and wisdom, Baby Suggs is similar to Eva. Baby Suggs is certainly instructive and protective. When she discovers that Sethe has killed one of her daughters, she takes Sethe’s boys inside and bathes them and bounds their wounds. Then she brings the youngest baby to Sethe in order to be fed. When Sethe takes the baby and does not let go of the dead one in her arms, Baby shouts, “Clean up! Clean yourself up!” (Beloved 179), and “they fought then. Like rivals over the heart of the loved, they fought. Each struggling for the nursing child. Baby Suggs lost when she slipped in a red puddle and fell” (179). This quotation illustrates not only that Baby Suggs is instructive and protective but also that the many losses of children she has experienced throughout her life have perhaps made her even more endearing toward her grandchildren. The scene she walks in on is not something she has experienced before. Baby Suggs has lost children who were sold and she has even decided not to love some, but her shock is apparent when she witnesses Sethe killing one of her own. She keeps asking God for forgiveness and says, “I beg your
pardon. Lord, I beg your pardon. I sure do” (180).

Despite all this, Baby Suggs welcomes Sethe at house 124, cares for her and her children and lives with her until she dies. After Halle disappears, Baby Suggs and Sethe rely on each other for support. Baby Suggs becomes an important part of the community. Similar to Eva’s “reign” in Bottom, Baby Suggs becomes a leader of the community but unlike Eva, who is forced to be put away by Sula, Baby Suggs eventually loses her will to live. As an endearing leader of her community, Baby Suggs “[gave] advice; pass[ed] messages; heal[ed] the sick, [hid] fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing” (Beloved 161). The community’s feelings shifted from joy to jealousy and people began to wonder why she loved “everybody like it was her job and hers alone” (161). As a result, Baby Suggs retreats to her bed and when her grandsons leave, she does not “even raise her head. From her sickbed she heard them go ... Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn’t get interested in leaving life or living it” (5). After the boys leave, the house is occupied only by females and before long, Baby Suggs dies and Denver and Sethe are alone with the visiting ghost.

The reaction of the community is highly significant here, as it illustrates Morrison’s point about going against the ancestor. What used to be gratitude for Baby Suggs’s dinners turns into resentment and anger. Suddenly people are “furious. They swallowed baking soda ... to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124. Whispered to each other in the yards about ... uncalled-for pride” (Beloved 163). Baby Suggs is hurt and “then she knew. Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (163) and “now she stood in the garden smelling disapproval, feeling a dark and coming thing” (173). The dark and coming thing is her own death followed by the arrival of Beloved, who haunts not only house 124 but
also the community at large. Beloved's ghost causes distress as if to remind people of the consequences of turning against their ancestor. Baby Suggs dies broken hearted and shortly after, Beloved returns in living form.

Although Beloved's is the only physically present ghost in house 124, there are many other ghosts in Sethe's memory, one of them being her own mother. Baby Suggs and Sethe's mother have a crucial similarity, namely the determination to decide which one of their babies to love. Unlike Baby Suggs, however, who loved most of her children, Sethe's mother only loved Sethe. When Beloved asks if Sethe's mother fixed her hair, Sethe explains that she does not have many memories with her mother but there is one she remembers clearly:

She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.' Scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn't think of anything so I just said what I thought. 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said ...

... She slapped my face. (72-73)

Sethe's most vivid memory of her mother is when she tells her daughter how to recognize her if she is murdered but Sethe is too young to understand. Sethe's mother is trying to be instructive and protective here but her protectiveness is limited by her circumstances. The only piece of wisdom she can pass on to her child is to show her the mark on her body in order to be recognized if found dead and to slap her as punishment for wishing the mark on
her own body, both of which are not understood by young Sethe. Like Baby Suggs, who is cut off from most of her children and loses the opportunity to become an ancestor to the following generations, Sethe’s mother is murdered and is unrecognizable, even by her mark. Sethe finds out from a fellow slave that, like Baby Suggs, her mother has differentiated between which one of her children to love:

What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in.
The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message – that was and had been there all along … She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. ‘She threw them all away but you. The one from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. (74)

The presence of the ancestor in Beloved is very much emphasized and because the events take place during slavery, Morrison is able to include the African ancestor. Together, the stories of Baby Suggs and Sethe’s mother illustrate the ancestor ripped apart from her successors, history cut off and fragmented. In the midst of all this violence, Sethe’s murder of her own baby is shocking but not misplaced. Sethe has heard, seen and lived the insufferable stories. Her love does not allow for her children to be part of such stories. In this respect, her maternal love is similar to Eva’s – both women love their children too much to let them live lives they do not see fit for them. Morrison’s statement about grandparents and ancestors being the place for cultural information and protectiveness (Taylor-Guthrie 238) does not apply to Sethe’s mother and applies only partially to Baby Suggs. The bodies of both ancestors are abused and they must have children whom they are forced not to love. They are
not able to protect or properly share cultural information because they are not with their
children. They either choose not to be responsible for their children or they are not able to
and, as a result, the children cannot be responsible to them. The widening circle that
Morrison hopes for does not apply to slavery, which fragments ancestors and often breaks the
cultural transmission of knowledge within and across generations.

It is no surprise then that carrying the pain of her dead child in addition to her hurt
and broken family, Sethe is unable to find emotional fulfillment. When Baby Suggs dies, the
matriarch of the house disappears. Although Sethe cares for Denver, her fragile emotional
state does not allow her to claim the role of a powerful matriarch. Her house is haunted by
Beloved’s ghost, her husband has disappeared, her sons have left her, the community shuns
her and as a grownup, she is angry with her mother “but not certain at what” (Beloved 74).
She is lonely and “a mighty wish for Baby Suggs broke over her like surf” (74) because
despite Baby’s anger at Sethe’s murder of her daughter, Beloved, the women had been a
family. This is the state in which Paul D finds Sethe and although he helps to somewhat
reintegrate her in the community and bring some love to her life, Sethe is still too hurt. The
lack of her emotional healing prevents her from moving on, as is illustrated by the scene
between her and Paul D when he says that she has two feet and not four (previously
discussed in chapter one). Determined to hold on to her belief that her murdering the child
was justified, she pushes away the only person, other than Denver, who cares for her.

Beloved’s return forces Sethe to go through a process of re-memoration in which
Sethe must confront her ancestral stories to heal and reach emotional maturity. The process
of Sethe’s re-memoration is what Christian calls a process that is “not only remembrance for
the sake of remembrance, but remembrance as the only way to begin the process of healing
that psychic wound, which continues to have grave effects on the present” (14). Sethe must
face all ghosts from her past, not just Beloved. Similar to Violet’s ability to let go of her anger in order to heal and accept herself fully, Sethe must learn to forgive herself to be the mother Denver needs, the matriarch of the house with a story to pass on. Significantly, similar to Alice and Violet, Paul D acts as “mother” to Sethe in order to help her heal. When she recognizes the importance of self as she repeats, “Me? Me?” (322), she finally realizes that she is her own best thing, and heals. Paul D’s words emphasize the importance of the past: “Sethe … me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (322). Paul D “wants to put his story next to hers” (322) and now that Sethe has begun the process of healing, theirs is a story that will be passed on.
Conclusion

In her fiction, Morrison emphasizes the significance of relationships as a shaping force behind the identity of female characters. In this thesis, I explored some of the relationships in the lives of Morrison's female characters in *Sula, Jazz* and *Beloved*. Specifically, I focused on female friendships, romantic relationships and connection to the ancestors through relationships with the living elders. What these relationships have in common is that in their own ways, they contribute to the healing of the female characters by helping them to reclaim their agency and overcome emotional pain and alienation from the community through achieving a sense of belonging. While some relationships are more effective in this regard than others, they all have a significant impact on shaping the way in which female characters see themselves.

Female friendship is formed through a bonding and solidarity among female characters. In *Sula*, female friendship is the predominant theme. The novel centers on Nel and Sula's friendship and the way it changes throughout the years. Race plays a crucial role not only in the formation of their childhood friendship but also in the way the girls make decisions as the years pass. For example, Nel understands her limited opportunities as a black woman from Bottom, and because of this and also due to her desire to please her mother and the community, she decides to settle into the role of wife and mother by marrying Jude. Sula, on the other hand, reacts differently to her role as black woman. Contrary to Nel, she rejects societal expectations and instead of marrying, she attends college and later travels. Despite the different choices, the girls' friendship continues when Sula returns to Bottom. It is Jude's affair with Sula that brings the girls' friendship to an end. Without Jude or Sula, Nel loses her sense of belonging and connectedness and when her community and parental duties fail to
fulfill her, she becomes alienated. Sula also fails to achieve fulfillment after Ajax does not reciprocate her desire for a relationship. For both girls, the relationship that has contributed to their self-fulfillment is only the one they had with each other. Sula thinks of Nel as she dies and Nel cries at Sula’s grave when she realizes that all these years, it is not Jude she has missed but Sula. As neither romantic relationships nor parental, filial or community duties satisfy the women, Morrison indicates that self-fulfillment can only be achieved through self-actualization and strong female friendship is part of this process.

Unlike Nel and Sula, who meet when they are young girls, Alice and Violet in Jazz, do not meet until later in life, when both women are having a difficult time and the development of their friendship seems unlikely. Violet has entirely surrendered her agency due to unfortunate circumstances and Alice is overcome with grief due to the loss of her niece. Further, Violet’s husband is responsible for Dorcas’s death. Through the development of their friendship, however, Morrison points out the important factors that contribute to their bond, elements that are stronger than the women’s initial dislike for each other. Both are black women, who have moved from the south and are living alienated lives in a big city. Alice has lost her niece, the daughter she never had, and Violet has figuratively lost her husband to the dead girl. Dorcas’s absence haunts both women. When Alice plays mother to Violet, the latter heals emotionally. The women laugh together. Their laughter indicates that they are aware of their circumstances and are defying them by reclaiming their agency and deciding to achieve fulfillment despite their conditions. It is important to note that Violet’s emotional healing happens outside of her relationship with Joe and he must learn to fall in love with her all over again. Through their friendship, Morrison suggests that women’s self-fulfillment, emotional healing and a sense of belonging are achieved in their relationships.
with other women. Moreover, this must be achieved before a woman can have a successful romantic relationship with a man.

Although race is an important bond in the formation of female friendship, it is not a defining factor, as illustrated by Sethe’s friendship with Amy in *Beloved*. Sethe and Amy’s friendship is unique in that the women do not know each other for long and they do not remain in each other’s lives after their chance meeting in the forest. By illustrating how Amy nurses Sethe back to health and that Sethe names her daughter after her in acknowledgment and gratitude for the act that saves her life, Morrison demonstrates that, under special circumstances, gender and socio-economic status can change the meaning of race. It is important to note that the women share similar circumstances, as both are running away and hiding in the forest, although one is a slave and the other is an indentured servant. Female friendship, expressed among the community women as concern for Sethe’s well being, saves Sethe when she once again finds herself in difficult and unusual circumstances. Morrison suggests that even among women who do not get along, race is a bond that is strong enough to encourage women to put aside their differences and help one another.

Like female friendship, romantic relationships play a crucial role in shaping the identity of female characters, but romance often interferes with a woman’s ability to maintain her individuality and commit to the relationship. This is especially the case with Dorcas from *Jazz*, who is young and lacks self-reflection. Her desire is to be envied by her friends and as such, she pursues Acton, who does not care for her in the same way as Joe. Lacking self-recognition, she surrenders her agency to Acton and dies before the novel begins, remaining voiceless throughout the story. Recognizing Joe’s obsession with the dead girl, Violet attempts to make him jealous but this fails to repair her relationship. It is only after Violet achieves self-fulfillment and reclaims her agency that she is able to repair her relationship.
with Joe, and, as stated above, her reconfiguration of self happens outside of her romantic relationship. In this case, the man, the romantic partner, is a barrier to the woman's journey toward reconfiguration of self.

In *Sula*, Morrison suggests that a significant barrier in romantic relationships is financial difficulty, and more specifically, a woman's dependence on her romantic partner. For example, when Boy Boy abandons Eva, she resorts to cutting off her leg for insurance money in order to support her family. After she receives her payment, she never remarries. Similarly, because her mother financially supports her, the community women tolerate that Hannah sleeps with their husbands because she is not depleting their families' financial resources. Hannah also never remarries, suggesting that with financial support and many affairs, she is getting no less than the married women. Likewise, Sula never marries, although she does finally succumb to societal expectations by desiring a committed relationship with Ajax. Sula, however, is different from the other female characters in these three novels. She has no desire to fit in with the community and her wish for a relationship with Ajax is due to her belief that in him, she has finally found someone who understands her. Financial support and the need to fit in are not part of Sula's love for Ajax. On the contrary, Nel marries Jude to please her mother and fit in with the community. Unlike Sula, she does not see Jude as a special person who understands her. She and Jude are similar in that they both search for a person to fulfill the roles of husband and wife in a marriage. As a result of surrendering her agency and not maintaining her individuality while being committed, Nel collapses when Jude leaves her and it takes her a long time to recover from his absence. When Nel finally achieves self-recognition at the end of the novel, it is too late to repair both her relationship with Jude and her friendship with Sula. Through Nel's outcome Morrison indicates that Sethe's relationship with Paul D is different when comparing *Beloved* to the others in these
novels, since Paul D plays a crucial role in Sethe's emotional healing and reconfiguration of self. Unlike the other women, Sethe reclaims her agency with the help of a man and, in this regard, their relationship is unique. Unlike the other women, who surrender their agency to their romantic partners, Sethe is unable to maintain her individuality while living with her guilt. After Beloved leaves and Sethe feels that she has no reason to live, Paul D reminds her that she is her own best thing and that she has her own life to live. At the end of the novel, Sethe has just discovered that she can indeed live without Beloved. This moment of recognition marks not Sethe's complete journey toward emotional healing, but its beginning. That Paul D is present for this moment and that he says that he wants to put his story next to hers indicates that he will be with Sethe throughout her journey and afterward.

Another relationship Morrison articulates is that between the female characters and their ancestors through their connection to the elders. Morrison suggests that a relationship with the elders is essential in order for female characters to achieve a sense of connectedness and belonging. Often a break from the ancestors results in alienation from one's own history, as in the case of Sula, who forces Eva out of her home in the eponymous novel. In financially supporting her family and playing a directing role in the lives of her community members, Eva establishes herself as a matriarch. Despite her supportive role in not only Sula's life but also her mother's, Sula does treat Eva with the respect she deserves. In breaking from her elder, and by extension, her ancestors, Sula lives a lonely and unfulfilled life and eventually dies alone, ironically in Eva's bed. Thus a break from the ancestors results not only in an unfulfilling life but also in the literal death of Sula.

Contrarily, in *Jazz*, reconnecting with her ancestors by reflecting on her mother and grandmother and finally forgiving Rose Dear helps Violet heal emotionally. As a result, she is able not only to achieve self-actualization but also, to repair her relationship with Joe. As
mentioned earlier, Violet achieves this with the help of motherly Alice and this indicates that a connection to the mother role is essential in overcoming emotional pain. In the absence of her own mother, Alice plays this role and, in turn, Violet is able to forgive Rose Dear. Moreover, Violet also forgives True Belle. Her forgiveness comes after her recognition that, although True Belle really did love Golden Grey, the circumstances of her slavery were beyond her control. Violet is able to understand the similarity between herself and her grandmother. Due to conventions in Southern romance novels wherein adoration of a “white child” is one of its stock themes, together with miscegenation, her grandmother loved Golden Grey as her own just as Violet previously wished she was white and light again.

Lastly, the relationship with ancestors is a central theme in *Beloved*, as the novel is set in times of slavery and we not only enter a world where black bodies are used as objects but also read about African ancestors and the Middle Passage. In order to be identified in case of violent death, Sethe’s mother has to show Sethe the mark on her body. Recognizing that the men who raped her have used her body as object of lust, Nan refuses to love all but one of her children, Sethe, whose father she loved. Sethe’s mother does not survive slavery and leaves Sethe alone, hurt, angry and disconnected from her ancestors. In her rage against slavery and the institutionalization of racism, Sethe believes she is doing her child a favour by killing her. In her own mother’s absence, Baby Suggs becomes the maternal figure in Sethe’s family but even with her purchased freedom, she is not strong enough to overcome the emotional pain of slavery and eventually loses her will to live. Ancestral suffering carries over to the descendants and in order to heal, Sethe, like Violet, must embark on a journey of re-memoration, reconnecting with the ancestors and letting go of guilt and anger.

A connection with the ancestors through the living elders is essential in Morrison’s fiction, as it helps the female characters achieve a sense of belonging. This connection,
however, is crucial in addition to other significant relationships, such as female friendship and romantic relationships. The most significant impact that these relationships have on the female characters is their ability to help them heal emotionally, and in turn, reclaim their agency and achieve self-fulfillment. None of the characters realize self-actualization on their own. In fact, Sula, the only one who tries, dies alone and disconnected from all the people who once loved her. In her fiction, Morrison emphasizes the importance of meaningful relationships and also suggests that without a connection to the ancestors, the living elders and female friends, a woman cannot realize self-fulfillment, without which a successful romantic relationship cannot form. Thus the significance of these relationships extends beyond one's own personal emotional healing, since without it, the women could not pass on emotional well being to the future generations, as Violet does with Felice. As a result, the circle of emotional pain breaks and future generations of women can begin to see themselves only through their own eyes.


