1995

A Different Destination: The American Journey Theme in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Jill Holbrook
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Available by permission of the author. Reproduction or retransmission of this material in any form is prohibited without expressed written permission of the author.
A Different Destination: The American Journey Theme in the Novels of Toni Morrison

A Thesis
The Honors Program
College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"
and the Degree Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of English

by
Jill Anne Holbrook
April, 1995
Approval Page

Project Title: A Different Destination: The American Journey Theme in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Approved by:

Dr. Nancy Bynes, O.S.B.
Associate Professor of English

Dr. Madhuram R. Hildt
Assistant Professor of English

Mark Reamer, O.S.B.
Professor of Honors

Chair, Department of English

Margaret L. Carr
Director, Honors Thesis Program

Director, Honors Program
For John, Mary, Brian and Beth
My Most Important Community
The myth of the American journey—with all its connected ideas of escape, exploration, and self-discovery—has made a profound impact on American literature and on American society as a whole. Classically, the American journey myth, born with the settling and colonization of the American continent by white European immigrants, has taken firm root in the American consciousness: its main tenet, shaped and formed through the canon of American literature, "dramatizes the plight of the American male escaping the feminine domestication of civilization" (Mayers 664). The myth originated in the American encounter with the frontier, a development concisely described by Mark Busby et. al. in their introduction to The Frontier Experience and the American Dream:

The frontier as the limit of existing society demarcated the line beyond which beckoned freedom from existing social and political restraints. In effect, the frontier was the gateway through which one might escape from time into space, from bounds to boundlessness. (Busby et. al. 6)

Though the frontier has disappeared, the journey myth, and the idyllic destination it promises, has not: its allure of boundless space, freedom and individuality, retains a strong
impact on the consciousness of the dominant American class which created the myth in the first place. Busby et. al. continue: "The sense that such a place exists, or at least should exist, creates the imaginative context in which many American writers work" (6). A typical register of journey literature would include Irving's "Rip Van Winkle," Fenimore Cooper's The Prairie, Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Mayers 676), Melville's Moby Dick and Hemingway's Old Man and the Sea.

The idea that one may escape into freedom by escaping society is one of the major defining traits of the journey myth as it is depicted in American literature (Bellah et. al. 144). However, the ability to forsake society to search for one's singular identity implies both mobility and a measure of power—and, traditionally, both of these capacities have belonged almost exclusively to white men, as exemplified by the above listing of classical American literature. The American journeyer also tends not to return to the society he vacates: "Rather than bringing their knowledge home, our heroes more typically ride into the sunset, after blazing a trail for others to follow" (Mogen 26). It is crucial to note that the object of the typical journey is to escape society and the challenges of living in community which social membership implies. Furthermore,
the popular form of the myth, by its very nature, implies that it applies generically and universally to everyone in society.

However, the assumption that the myth holds true for everyone is challenged by the experiences of those who do not belong to the cultural mainstream and who, in many cases, are excluded from the mainstream due to race and gender. For those who are neither white nor male, following the "blazing trail" of the myth presents certain difficulties. As Nina Baym writes:

The [American] myth holds that, as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality. . . there is only one way to relate it to the individual—as an adversary. The subject of this myth is supposed to stand for human nature.

[T]he problem is not so much with the protagonist but with the other participants in his story—the entrammeling society and the promising landscape. For both of these are depicted in unmistakably feminine terms, and this gives a sexual character to the protagonists' story which does, indeed, limit its applicability to women. (71)

For those who are not male (and I would include white), the
myth that one may escape society to realize one's individuality—and, indeed, the idea that society itself is an instrument which destroys the identity—is destructive in itself.

In the work of Toni Morrison, these effects of the dominant culture's paradigms assume a role of vital significance. In her fiction, Morrison explores the impact of cultural myths and expectations on individuals and communities whose experiences lie outside society's ideal: she examines the experiences of blacks and women who must live within the strictured social framework created, for the most part, by white male views. I propose that Morrison contrasts her characters' journeys with the mythical American journey, thus accentuating the challenges posed to her characters by the sexual and racial nature of American society. Specifically, her characters' journeys, rather than allowing them to escape a flawed society as prescribed by the myth, instead lead them back to their communities and to deeper struggle.

In contrast to the unreality of the myth, the characters in Morrison's novels cannot fly from the "entrambling society." Consequently, her characters learn that they must struggle to find their identity not in an unpeopled wilderness, but in a dynamic process of relation
to those around them. This revelation is fraught with ambiguity, because especially for blacks and women, community—with all its stabilizing relationships and debilitating prejudices—offers a dual dose of salvation and destruction. As critic Barbara Hill Rigney remarks:

In Morrison's fictions, identity is always provisional; there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from community, no matter how tragic or futile the operations of that community might be. (38)

The problem, then, of how the individual will handle membership in the larger group is of paramount importance to Morrison's characters, whose lives she portrays as intimately bound with the fate of the community. The journey theme, as she uses it in her writing, provides Morrison with a powerful tool for her explorations of the interrelationship between the community and the individual.

* * * * *
In *Sula*, Morrison depicts the conflict between the individual and community through Nel's and Sula's personal and social relationship. As children, the friendship between the girls provides a mutual sense of balance, allowing them to escape some of the uncomfortable rigidity of their young lives. However, disaster occurs when, as adults, their relationship disintegrates under the indirect and insidious pressures of sexism and racism, and they are pushed toward extreme social roles—Nel as a perfect wife, Sula as a perfect pariah.

*Sula* builds around the framework of journeys. Nel, as a girl, is introduced in the context of a journey; the first part of the novel begins with Sula leaving on a journey; the second part of the novel opens with Sula's return from her journey; and the novel concludes with Nel, now a middle-aged woman, making a final journey of self-discovery. Throughout the novel, journeys highlight the interrelationship between the identity of the individual and the identity of the community.

The survival of the black community and the black individual within a larger white society is one of the major tensions in *Sula*; thus, the novel unfolds with the ironic contrasts with which a besieged but enduring black community has learned to live. The people live high on the infertile
hillsides of an Ohio river valley, a region known to them as the "Bottom" (the paradoxical name stems from "a nigger joke," an incident where a hapless ex-slave was duped by his former owner)(4). In consequence, the blacks can "literally look down on the white folks" (5) in the town below, though their social standing is, of course, exactly the opposite of their spatial relationship. The narrator notes that a valley man walking through the black area would hear only laughter--but that the pain, of which the laughter is only part, would escape him. Most ironically, perhaps, the white hunters who venture into the natural beauty of the Bottom wonder sometimes if "[m]aybe it was the bottom of heaven" (6). For its part, the black community is "mightily preoccupied with earthly things . . . wondering . . . what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom" (6). The last statement of the opening relates the development of the community's identity to the development of an individual's identity, a theme which is carried throughout the novel in the persons of Sula and Nel.

Of the two characters, it is actually Nel who is introduced first. Her character is that of a dutiful, subdued daughter. Nel's repressed life is controlled by her
mother, Helene, who wants to imprint the values of middle-class white society into her offspring. Helene, herself the daughter of a prostitute, turns against the world of sensuality and sex her mother symbolizes. Instead, Helene accepts and embodies the most confining expectations which white society demands of the bourgeois woman. She purges herself of any wildness or spontaneity, and attempts to purge her daughter as well: "Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18).

Significantly, Nel's presentation is clothed in the fabric of journey, as she and her mother travel to New Orleans for the burial of Nel's great-grandmother. The journey, for Nel, simultaneously serves as a searing introduction to the racism in the world outside the Bottom and as an exciting means for separating herself from the restraining demands of her mother.

Nel witnesses firsthand the devastating impact of racism as her mother is accosted by a white train conductor. Helene responds with a brilliant, placating smile, to the disgust of some black soldiers observing the scene:

"Behind Nel was the bright and blazing light of her mother's smile; before her the midnight eyes of the
soldiers. She saw the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble. No change in the expression of the eyes, but a hard wetness that veiled them as they looked at the stretch of her mother's foolish smile. (21-22)

Nel's childish impression is that her mother, powerful Helene, has turned to "custard." (22)

If this tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequalled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look, if she were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too.

It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard--always. (22)

The conductor's negation of her mother and the soldiers' aversion cause Nel to question deeply her own image of self.

Nel's agreeable meeting with her prostitute grandmother Rochelle, a charmingly sensual woman dressed in canary yellow and smelling of gardenias, arouses more questions for Nel about her self-identity--especially in light of Helene's icy disapproval of Rochelle. The net result of these two incidents is that upon their return to the bottom, Nel defines herself as separate from her mother:

It had been an exhilarating trip but a fearful one--
she had gone on a real trip, and now she was different. She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her . . . 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.' (28)

Nel's journey provides her with a revelation of her identity in one way, albeit a negative one, by marking her desire to be different from the kind of person her mother represents--stiff, prudish, and in the world outside the Bottom, ultimately yielding and powerless in the face of white condescension. In this segment, Nel envisions journeying as an escape from unpleasureable and confining societal restraints, a way to break away from her habit of viewing herself as her mother wants her to do. While Nel's desire for flight may seem to coincide with the dominant American journey myth, Morrison shows that the ideal of escape is impossible for Nel because of the prejudice surrounding her; the experiences of Helene on the train throw into cruel relief the illusory nature of Nel's dreams of exploration. However, the very idea of journeying offers her the possibility of self-exploration that her life in the Bottom so pointedly lacks.
It is significant that Nel forgets her dreams of travel once she forms a friendship with Sula: "Leaving Medallion would be her goal. But that was before she met Sula" (29). For Sula allows Nel to explore Nel's identity in a positive way, just as Nel allows Sula a reciprocal opportunity. Each girl provides the other with an element that the other craves: Sula offers Nel freedom, the opportunity for exploration, the chance to dabble with the disorder of creativity, and Nel offers Sula stability, the ground in which to grow some roots, a space of silence for thinking. This complementary opposition is demonstrated by the contrast between their homes, a contrast which invigorates and satisfies their opposite longings. Nel prefers the stimulation of Sula's "household of throbbing disorder" (52), while Sula drinks the "high silence of [Helene's] incredibly orderly house" (51). Even their fantasies are complementary. Nel envisions herself waiting passively for a prince, while Sula gallops toward an unknown destination on a gray-and-white horse. Critic Barbara Smith suggests that the prince for whom Nel waits is Sula, and that Sula's destination is actually Nel (176). Smith offers these dreams as evidence that Sula and Nel share a lesbian relationship; I am more inclined to view it as testimony to their deep psychic need for companionship. As the narrator
tell us, "[t]hey were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone" (51). When they find the "someone" they are looking for, they are driven together with all the passion of their loneliness.

Realizing that as black children, as females, they are unimportant to the world around them, the girls share a bond beyond mere friendship. "Twelve[,] ... wishbone thin and easy-assed" (52), together they set about interrogating the limits of experience:

Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on . . . they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

Together as always, they collide with the boundaries of their explorations one summer afternoon, in a passage ripe with the luscious language of budding sexuality (58). Sula and Nel are messing around by the river that passes through the Bottom, when Chicken Little, a child both girls know, wanders by. Sula swings him around playfully, then lets go,
and he flies into the river--and never resurfaces. The narrative, which moves on matter-of-factly, heightens the reader's sense of shock. It takes a moment to fully realize that not only has Chicken drowned, but that Sula's subsequent terror stems not from the act itself but from her desire to avoid responsibility.

This moment of seemingly casual destruction is pivotal, whether or not the drowning was intentional, because Sula's action and her ability to evade its consequences serve somehow to sever her roots from the entwining expectations of the community. It is her first movement toward flight from acceptable social boundaries defined by the black community and enforced by the dominant white world outside. After the drowning, Sula is shocked into action, but only after Nel mentions that "somebody saw" (61). The "someone" is Shadrack, a half-mad social outcast. Meaningfully, Sula runs to this refugee from society, maybe for help or maybe out of fear. When she finds him, Shadrack's response to Sula's unspoken question is a single enigmatic word: "Always" (62). This single word can be interpreted as Sula's permanent initiation into the world symbolized by Shadrack, a world frighteningly free from the tethers of responsibility and social expectation.

Chicken Little's drowning, paradoxically,
simultaneously cements Sula's and Nel's relationship and sends the first devastating crack shivering up its foundations. They are bound together, more tightly than ever, by their mutual concealment of Sula's action, their mutual silence on Nel's witness of it. Never in the novel do they explicitly discuss the event, but its implications lurk, unarticulated, behind many of their subsequent discussions. Simultaneously, Nel realizes at Chicken's funeral that a "space," perhaps analogous to the death-signifying "closed place in the water" into which Chicken has disappeared, has parted them: "Nel and Sula did not touch hands or look at each other during the funeral. There was a space, a separateness between them" (64). The feeling of space is only temporary, and after the funeral "they relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends" (66). Nevertheless, the implications of the estrangement are clear; the powers of Nel's and Sula's friendship, formidable though they are, are limited in a world echoing with the reality of funerals and unexpected death.

The next significant event involving Nel and Sula, both now seventeen, is Nel's wedding to Jude Greene. Jude, deeply embittered by the prejudice of white bosses who
refuse to hire black workers to build the "New River Road," an improvement project which somehow never gets started, decides to marry Nel. He explains his reasons:

[M]ostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. . . . Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her, he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude. (83)

Nel's acquiescence to becoming a fraction of a person so her husband can become a whole one signals her acceptance of the assigned social role for a black woman. In essence, Nel's wedding and reception, an imitation of white manners and popular culture, encapsulate her surrender to the rigidity of family and community expectations.

Weddings, as Sula's grandmother Eva knows, and critic Barbara Christian points out (162), signify death. Nel's wedding signals the death of her early dreams of travel and adventure, however futile those dreams may have been, and also of the creative personal exploration in which she and Sula had been engaged: her journeying is curtailed by the expectations fostered by the dominant culture. Moreover, and most significantly, Nel's wedding suggests the death of the closeness between the two, although, like Chicken
Little's death, the reader does not comprehend it at once. If Chicken's death played a key role in pushing Sula toward her fate, so Nel's wedding plays an analogous role in pushing her toward a final rigid immobility where she is rooted so strongly in societal expectations that she has no room in which to grow.

Sula, much more than Nel, realizes the rending of their intimacy. With her ties to Nel so suddenly weakened, she lights out alone on her own journey. Significantly, Nel is the one who sees Sula walk down a path Nel can no longer follow:

When [Nel] raised her eyes . . . she saw through the open door a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of a strut, down the path toward the road. . . . Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that lowness was amused. It would be ten years before they saw each other again, and their meeting would be thick with birds. (85)

Symbolically, the first part of the novel closes with the girlhood friends diverging into their adult lives and adult identities.

Sula's return to the Bottom after her journey opens the second part of the novel, and—as foreshadowed by the
narrator—it is "accompanied by a plague of robins" (90). The robins may be taken to symbolize Sula herself. Birds traditionally embody flight and freedom, and robins are migratory birds whose reappearance signifies the return of spring; the season of growth and change. However, the plague of robins connected with Sula is symptomatic of something gone wrong, of an wild surfeit of freedom, a peculiar kind of growth and change in her character. The narrator reports that children, who usually welcomed the birds, are excited into stoning them, a reception which symbolically prefigures the Bottom's reaction to Sula. Nel, tied in an unsatisfactory marriage "which over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart" (95), at first welcomes Sula back to the Bottom. In addition to Sula's outwardly glamorous appearance, Nel senses a deeper alteration caused by time and travel:

"You been gone too long, Sula," [Nel said.]

"Not too long, but maybe too far."

"Tell me about it. The Big City."

"Big is all it is. A big Medallion." (96, 98)

These brief statements are all that Sula ever says about her absence and her journey. The omission of a full account leaves a hole, a gaping space as large as the ten-year gap in the narrative.
The very fact that Sula has returned, however, shows the emptiness at the heart of her travels. Had she found fulfillment, the promise of her dreams, she would not have returned to the constricted, cramped life of the Bottom. Though it is not explicitly stated, we can deduce that the world beyond the Bottom presented her with the kind of reception Helene and Nel received on their trip to New Orleans. The "big city" offers her no more opportunity than does the enclosed community where she grew up. The reason Sula returns to the Bottom, is, as she herself suggests, because "there's no place else for me to go" (101).

* * *

Essentially, Sula's journey contradicts the major tenets of the American journey myth. Sula, the solitary wanderer, has not found the gratification promised by the so-called American dream; traveling, seeing the world, even obtaining a college education do not grant her the opportunity to possess the world in which she travels (98). The world of white America does not offer its bounties to young black women. Sula's recourse, in contrast to the journey myth, is a return to the sustenance of the community, flawed though the community may be. The price of
its acceptance of her is high; it expects Sula to fulfill the kind of social role which Nel has assumed, the sexually and racially restricted role imposed in part by the white society which surrounds the Bottom the way a violent ocean surrounds a storm-beaten island.

This expectation is introduced explicitly through Sula's grandmother Eva. The two women quarrel immediately upon Sula's return:

"When you [Sula] gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you," [said Eva].

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man." (92)

Sula reacts to her grandmother's criticism by having Eva committed to a nursing home. This action definitively denotes Sula's rejection of the social expectation her grandmother articulates, and her own embarkment on her mission to "make" herself and to free herself from all roles, including the role of granddaughter. Her decision to liberate herself from community expectations brings to completion the estrangement process begun at the drowning of Chicken Little.

The result of Sula's decision to act however she
pleases causes unforeseen effects in the various lives which make up the Bottom—beginning with Nel's life. Sula, unconcerned, has sex with Nel's husband Jude, and consequently he leaves Nel, who is devastated by the double betrayal:

The smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginning of her very own howl. But it did not come.

[N]ow her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away. (111)

Nel's loss, at one stroke, of husband and friend marks the grim completion of the stagnation process begun at her wedding. The gray cobwebs wrapped around her heart now become a frightening, visible entity "a gray ball hovering . . . a ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence" (109). The gray ball signifies her socially upright, but emotionally bereft existence.

The rest of the community, like Nel, turns against Sula for reasons that seem folkloric, but actually reflect the community's distrust for a woman who refuses to value its
expectations: rumors fly around Sula like the plague of robins once did. Mr. Finley, who had sucked on chicken bones for thirteen years, sees Sula and suddenly chokes to death; she does not look her age, and unlike the other women she has "no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck" (115); she doesn't belch when she drinks beer; she lays the men of the town once and only once, which arouses the rage of both the men and the women; and, finally, Sula is accused of sleeping with white men, a notion which brands her definitively as a pariah.

The townspeople, significantly, link Sula to Shadrack, reinforcing their common role as outcasts. Shadrack, they say, recognizes Sula as one of his own:

"Yeh, so how come [Shadrack] tip his hat to Sula? How come he don't cuss her?"

"Two devils."

"Exactly!" (117)

Rather than disputing the town's evaluation of her character, Sula reacts with complete indifference. Nevertheless, Sula's attempt to be free of all social expectations means, ironically, that she must accept the role of pariah which the community assigns her. Absolute freedom is an illusion for Morrison's characters, and Sula is no exception. However, she is not powerless in the
community of the Bottom, as she perhaps was in the white society around it. The community exerts pressures on the individual, but even the most outcast individual may exercise a tremendous influence—destructive or constructive—on the community as well. As Trudier Harris writes:

[Sula's] wanderings away from the Bottom can only bring her full circle . . . back to it, for it is able to absorb if not condone her "otherness," and it gives her the identity that locks her both inside and outside the community's folk traditions. People in the community grant to her the power that she has, and she accommodates them by living out their fantasies of otherness. (57)

Sula gains her power, in part, from the vitality of her female lineage, from the casual potency of her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva. The narrator says that "Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her" (118). These two exceptional women possess enough originality and enough force to escape the confinement of traditional roles, at least to some extent, and within limits, to live on their own terms. Hannah, for example, sleeps with as many men as she can, yet remains uncondemned by the town (even if the women resent her actions). Eva, the stronger of the two
women, whom Barbara Christian compares to the Earth Mother Goddess, "both gives life and takes it away" (159). Her powers extend to the supernatural, as in her naming (and thereby creation) of the deweys, three identical boys who remain frozen at a stunted height of forty-eight inches and forever locked in childish rebellion.

Yet these women's power--like Sula's--is circumscribed by the limits of what society will allow them. For instance, Eva's most distinctive physical trait, her missing leg, is the visible result of her desperate attempt to feed her starving children: the Bottom rumors that she put it under a train to collect insurance money. The empty space where the limb belongs is a constant reminder of the sacrifice Eva made for her family, since society offered no less drastic recourse for a poor black woman.

Correspondingly, despite her magic, Eva cannot prevent Hannah from burning to death on a day filled with omens. And, as Keith Byerman points out, had she not given up her leg, she might have reached Hannah in time to save her (195).

Sula's power, like her grandmother's, is not absolute in its scope. Most of it, ironically, is beneficial to the community, for all its hatred of her--or, in fact, because of its hatred of her. The Bottom's common loathing of the
corruption it sees in Sula draws it together:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. . . . They began . . . [to] band together against the devil in their midst. (117-118)

Sula serves as the focus of the community's extravagant hatred. Just as Eva's enmity for her ex-husband BoyBoy kept her "alive and happy," so the Bottom's malice against Sula provides it with a vibrancy it lacked before (37). The power the community assigns her as pariah works as a supremely constructive force, giving the town a purpose, a reason to endure: "It was not for them to expel or annihilate [evil] . . . [T]he presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (118).

For Sula, however, there is no purpose, few reasons to endure, and little vibrancy to be gleaned from the town. Due to the lack of social outlets for her energy, the destructive side of Sula's power is unleashed on herself. She cuts off her only dependable social outlet when she sleeps with Jude and shatters for good her friendship with Nel. Sula feels the estrangement as keenly as Nel: "She
had clung to Nel as both the closest thing to an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. . . . Now Nel was one of them" (120)

For a brief period, Sula finds meaning in an affair with the free-spirited, unconventional Ajax. On the surface, it seems to be a good match, but Sula, inexplicably, becomes possessive, and Ajax leaves her. After he leaves, "she could find nothing, for he had left nothing but his stunning absence" (134). Sula's experience echoes Nel's emptiness when Jude left her and leads Sula back into recollections of her and Nel's common girlhood, of the dawning of their sexual maturity. Paradoxically, these memories, this connection, underlines an absence even more stunning than Ajax's--Nel's. Even Ajax cannot replace the emotional closeness Sula shared with Nel: "[Sula] had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be--for a woman." (121)

For the most part, after the foundation of her stable relationship with Nel has caved in, Sula's universe becomes one of caprice and whimsy, where the only meaning comes from her exploration of instability itself (121): "As willing to give pain as feel pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life. [S]he had no
center, no speck around which to grow" (119). The narrator makes it clear that Sula is locked in her solipsistic lifestyle by a confining world which offers no scope for her talents:

Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (121)

As Christian states, "It is with maddening recognition that we grasp Sula's tragedy--she is too full, and yet too static, to grow" (167). Doubly maddening is our recognition of why Sula is too full, and yet too static, to find the medium for which she yearns. An enforced social bias against the independent creativity of a black woman prevents her from pursuing her "speck around which to grow" (119). Her dangerousness, in the end, impacts only herself. She dies, forsaken and unrepentant, a husk of a woman in the silent shell of the household once famous for its "throbbing disorder."

Yet, perhaps at her death, Sula, the thwarted artist, realizes the impact of the only real work of art she has
made, the role of supreme pariah. As Barbara Hill Rigney writes, "One is tempted to define Morrison's pariahs as separate from their communities and from the idea of community in general . . . but we begin to understand that the pariah as artist is part of the community as artist" (58). Far from being enacted in a vacuum, Sula's role as pariah has made a tremendous impact on the structure of the Bottom. Her awareness of her true place in the community shows during her deathbed questioning of Nel:

"How do you know?" Sula asked.

"Know what?" Nel still wouldn't look at her

"About who was good. How you know it was you?"

"What you mean?"

"I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (146)

Indeed, though Nel has appropriated the attitude of Christian forgiveness dictated by society, it is Sula, the prodigal daughter, who has united the individual strands of the Bottom into a coherent, seamless fabric of community support.

After her death, the solidarity of the Bottom unravels once again. The community expects matters to improve after the annihilation of Sula's power, but instead, the situation worsens. Natural disasters and the loss of the interpersonal tenderness enforced by Sula's presence wear the town to the
breaking point. Finally, in a frustrated mob, many of the Bottom's residents storm down to the half-built tunnel by the New River Road, the improvement promised to the black citizens by the city of Medallion and never completed. Under the weight of early rains, it collapses, killing many of the demonstrators. The community's individuality, like Sula's and Nel's, is symbolically smothered by a combination of indifferent racism and malignant chance, and like Nel and Sula, the community also plays a role in choosing the pathway leading to its own doom. The collapse of the tunnel signals the community's emotional death, and it prefigures and foretells the actual physical one.

After another twenty-four year gap in the narrative, the reader watches the final physical collapse of the Bottom through the eyes of middle-aged Nel, who sees the last of the black population moving away from the now high-priced land. Nel, still enacting her socially dictated role, visits the half-senile Eva in the nursing home, and an odd thing occurs: Eva mistakes Nel for Sula and accuses her of drowning Chicken Little. Nel, inexplicably upset, leaves. Outside, "[A] bright space opened in her head and memory seeped into it" (169); this image, at last, absolves and reverses the image of the "closed dark space" where Chicken Little drowned, the dark space which first separated Sula
and Nel. When she recalls watching Chicken Little die Nel realizes that she enjoyed it, just as Sula watched, interested, as her mother burned. Nel grasps, indeed, how much she and Sula were alike, how close in spirit they once were.

This realization sends her on a final journey, "running almost" (170) to the cemetery where Sula is buried. There, Nel's recollection of Sula's death and funeral marks her reconciliation with Sula, with the fractured and painful past. As Nel trudges home in the twilight, her pilgrimage breaks her twenty-eight year old grief, as the gray stagnant ball scatters, the leaves stir. She smells the over-ripeness of the green things--just as she did on the day of Sula's betrayal. At last, she reaches the catharsis of the "howl" she denied herself when she discovered Jude's and Sula's infidelity:

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said, as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried. "girl, girl, girlgirlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry--loud and long--but it had no bottom and no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)
This journey, this final pilgrimage, brings Nel full circle into the past, back into the relationship with Sula which granted them mutual grace, a relationship ultimately both nurturing and flawed like the community which fostered it. A relationship, like the Bottom itself, which disappeared into circles of sorrow and loss. But the revelation, provided through the medium of Nel's journey, provides at the very least a measure of understanding and memory.

* * * * *

Journeys inform the discoveries of both Sula and Nel in this work. By examining how their journeys differ from the typical American journey and the discoveries these journeys prompt, we can see how Morrison retools the popular myth to reflect the truth of the experience of black women--thus challenging the assumptions behind the idea of the American journey.

For Sula and Nel, the journey of escape proves to be an illusion: Nel's trip to Louisiana shows the impossibility of avoiding racism; Sula's journey serves to teach her that the rest of America is merely "a big Medallion," steeped in the prejudice of her home town. Instead of escaping, they must find a way to live in a community which is somewhat
tolerant of difference, but yet is inured in the prejudice of the surrounding society. As children, rather than isolating themselves, Sula and Nel nurture each other in the search, providing each other with a buffer against the pain the world promises them. Their discovery of identity is relational rather than escapist, as in the journey myth; rather than enacting the white male idea of striking out into the frontier, Nel and Sula are paradoxically most fulfilled and most individual when they are most involved with each other.

Ultimately, the racism and sexism of society induces a breakdown in their friendship and they both lose the wholeness they once had. This problem of creating and keeping a whole self in a society which neglects to make an investment in them poses the central conflict for both Nel and Sula, although in different ways—Nel's problem lies in her total acquiescence to social laws at the expense of her personal development, while Sula's involves her sacrifice of all relationships at the altar of her personal identity. *Sula* may in fact depict through Nel and Sula two fairly unsuccessful ways to find a personal identity: Morrison polarizes them, pushes them to the boundaries, as she says herself, in order to demonstrate the effects of the individual on the community and vice versa:
The Bluest Eye [Morrison's first novel] was about one's dependency on the world for one's identification, whereas I wanted to attempt something quite the opposite in Sula, where you have a woman who is whimsical, who depends on her own instincts. . . . [M]y way is to push everything out to the edge, to see of what it is really made, so that Sula would be 'a free woman.' There's a lot of danger in that, you know, because you don't have a connection and don't feel that connection. (videotape interview, "Toni Morrison: A Writer in America")

The effects of this polarization as Morrison depicts it may seem pessimistic, but her novel highlights the difficulty of maintaining a healthy identity in a world where social prejudice truncates personal possibilities. The ending of the novel, while allowing Nel enlightenment about her commonalities with Sula, does not assure us that she will successfully grapple with its implications: "Even at the end, [Nel] doesn't know [about herself]. She is just beginning. She just barely grabs on at the end in those last lines" (interview, "Intimate Things in Place"). Nel's final journey brings her to a commencement--the start of a difficult, and perhaps impossible, search for her own sense
of self.
In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison again uses journeys to provide her characters with a scope for seeking the self. The journey theme is prominent in this novel and much more overt than in *Sula*—so much so, in fact, that much of the critical writing on *Song of Solomon* centers around the coming-of-age journey made by the main character Macon Dead III, also known as Milkman².

Since his initial goal is to sever ties with community and so "discover himself" in isolation, Milkman's journey appears to be an instance of the traditional male journey to manhood, another of the paradigms connected with the journey myth. In all significant respects, however, Milkman's journey ultimately subverts and contradicts the escapist values embraced by the American journey myth. Morrison subtly undercuts the journey myth by basing Milkman's entire journey—in fact, his life and identity itself—on the presence of women, and so subverts its meaning; as she says herself about *Song of Solomon*, "[s]otto (but not completely) is my own giggle (in Afro-American terms) of the proto-myth of the journey to manhood" (Morrison, "The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" 220). In order for Milkman to truly become a man, he must learn to respect the traditions of family and community, and in order to do that, he must learn to respect and value the women who (for the
most part) maintain them.

Milkman's journey in Song of Solomon, like Sula's, documents the interrelation between the black community and the individual in the wider context of the white society which surrounds it. His search for identity rests on his ability to distinguish between sustaining, life-giving community values stemming from his ancestral heritage or destructive, stultifying standards culled from the dominant, white-controlled society. These community values are embedded in the story, or history, of Milkman's family. Only when Milkman has learned his story can he fit himself into the continuing social history of his people and relate to his community in a way which is not destructive or exploitative. Significantly, Milkman's journey allows him to learn his story, which serves as a key component of his personal identity (Mason 174).

To emphasize his identity search, Morrison opens and uses throughout Song of Solomon the three motifs of naming, storytelling, and flight. The first sentence introduces the failed "flight" (in actuality a suicide jump), of a disconsolate black insurance agent, Robert Smith: "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock" (3). The "flight" becomes a kind of folk legend in the
Southside, the black section of the Michigan city where the novel begins.

As part of this initial story, the narrator demonstrates the importance of names to the black community, and introduces part of Milkman's family history as well. The "Mercy" from which the insurance agent flies is Mercy Hospital, which the Southside has named "No Mercy Hospital" because it will not admit blacks. The hospital fronts on a street originally known to the black community as Doctor Street because the first Negro doctor in the city--Milkman's grandfather, Dr. Foster--made his home there. However, the post office insists that the street's "real" name is Mains Avenue:

Some of the city legislators ... had notices posted ... that the avenue ... had been and always would be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street.

It was a genuinely clarifying notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well. They called it Not Doctor Street ... (4)

Thus, from the beginning of the novel, the connection between memory, naming and identity are made explicit for an embattled Southside--as well as grim humor as a method of coping with racism, as Theodore Mason points out in this
instance: "To survive, one must apparently play by the rules established by white economic and political power yet invert their meaning to subvert their strength and dominance" (175).

The excitement of the insurance agent's abortive flight causes a pregnant spectator to go into labor. The spectator is Milkman's mother and she is pregnant with Milkman himself; consequently, flight is figuratively connected with new life and with Milkman. However, for Milkman, flight takes on a deathlike significance as well. His childish finding that he cannot fly becomes a cruel, soul-killing disappointment:

When the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull . . . (9)

One wonders, initially, at Milkman's fixation with flight, which may be read as a desire to escape his surroundings. However, as the narrator begins to explore his family, it becomes clear that his family fosters this destructive desire by preventing the young boy from developing a strong self-identity or learning to replenish a bereft imagination.
The Dead household is dysfunctional, paralyzed, simultaneously strangled by the chords of hatred and materialism. Milkman is not able to count on either his mother or father as a source of traditional black community values (Harris 88). Milkman's father, Macon Dead, "kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her" (10). Milkman's mother, Ruth Foster, responds to her husband's hatred by living the life of a shadow. Her main source of mental stability lies in an ineradicable stain on her dining room table (11). Ruth, like Helene, is intent on living the life of a middle-class white woman; Macon, who despises her, yet uses her as grist in his own drive for material dominance. Milkman's two sisters, Lena and Corinthians, like his mother, live under the aegis of Macon's anger. And any values Ruth does manage to express to her son are based, like Nel's mother Helene Wright's, on the desirability of "imitat[ing] bourgeois whites" (Otten 47).

The only real stamp Ruth manages to put on her son is his nickname, Milkman. She nurses him until he is nearly four and she is discovered by her husband's flunky, who immediately rechristens the boy with a name that sticks: "'A milkman. That's what you got here, Miss Rufie. A
natural milkman if ever I seen one. Look out, womens. Here he come. Huh.'" (15). The name disgusts Macon, who suspects that it is "dirty, intimate, and hot" and, poignantly, causes him to long for an ancestor "who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness" (17). Again, Macon's reflections emphasize the connection between naming and identity, and the importance of the former in fostering the latter. For Macon as well as other characters in the novel, the act of naming goes beyond the mere utility of a word as a signifier for the individual; naming actually serves as a creative force in the formation of a person's being.

Macon himself, however, does not provide his son with any healthier a family identity than does Ruth. He is a hard, cold businessman, who tells Milkman the only "important" thing he must know: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). He can speak to his son only with commands or criticism (28):

"'I found a dead bird, Daddy.'"

"'Don't bring that mess in the house'" (28).

This snippet of conversation is especially telling, highlighting through the death of the bird the futility of Milkman's childhood dream of flight and Macon's lack of
sympathy or understanding.

It is not until the adolescent Milkman meets a friend, Guitar Bains, that his life begins to take shape:

When Milkman was twelve and Guitar was a teen-ager, they swaggered, haunched, leaned, straddled, ran all over town trying to pick fights or at least scare somebody. . . . When they succeeded they rode the wind and covered their mouths to aggravate their laughter. (177)

Guitar provides Milkman with a rebellious outlet he lacks in his family, and to some extent the boys' situation mirrors the circumstances of Nel and Sula: "Guitar Bains arouses Milkman's will to freedom as Sula does when she drives Nel from Helene Wright's spurious garden" (Otten 47). Yet unlike Nel and Sula, they do not mesh entirely or seem to become halves of a whole: "Theiris is a brotherhood based . . . on competition for dominance and a common need for protection in a world that is totally hostile to young black men and so preclusive of their dreams" (Rigney 80-81).

Though Guitar provides Milkman with his first taste of freedom, their relationship, based on adolescent rebellion, does not directly provide Milkman with the nurturing framework he needs to develop as a moral character. Instead, Milkman, provided with the money Guitar
lacks, slips into a lifestyle which combines the relaxed freedom of Guitar's habits with Macon's attitudes of materialism and condescension—a lifestyle, coincidentally, which does not incorporate Guitar's developing concern for social justice or Macon's discipline and tenacity.

The net result is that Milkman develops into a shallow, self-serving individual who resents any suggestion of ties to either community or family, yet who is dissatisfied with the vapidity and meaninglessness of his unfettered existence: "Milkman's desire only for happiness and not unhappiness, like his vanity, insulates him from the pain of others, and from his own pain, by letting him create in the fashion he chooses the only story which affects him" (Mason 183). Though socially popular with his particular group of pleasure-loving friends, his indifference isolates him from the roots of the black community, the source of the names and stories Morrison shows as essential to personal development.

One of the first striking examples of Milkman's indifference and disconnection occur when, as a teenager, he punches Macon after Macon hits Ruth at the dinner table:

There was the pain and sorrow of seeing his father crumple before any man—even himself. He also felt glee. He had won something and lost something in the
same instant. Infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities stretched out before him, but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, or accept the burden of the latter. (68)

Instead, he "cock-walked around the table" (68), a typical gesture of self-aggrandizement. Though Milkman's act initially may seem to indicate a concern for his mother, in fact, like nearly all his actions, it contains no forethought and he has no intention of facing its consequences. In his room, Milkman looks at his face in the mirror and realizes his personal fragmentation. His face "lacks coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative" (69). When Macon comes to Milkman's room and excuses his abuse of Ruth by a claim that she and her father were sexually involved, Milkman cannot find the strength or the interest to address either his father's abuse or his allegation. Instead, Milkman feels "disassociated from everything that he had heard" (74) and he dismisses his family as "a bunch of crazies" (76) with whom he obviously feels no solidarity.

As Milkman passes through his twenties and into his thirties, he remains a static, shallow character, and one measure of his immaturity can be seen in his treatment of women. Perhaps the height of his cruelty, born out of
indifference, occurs when he ends his twelve-year affair with his own cousin, Hagar, daughter of his father's sister Pilate. He crassly thinks of her as his "third beer . . . the one you drink because it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (91). He terminates the liaison by sending her an impersonal letter: "It was the word 'gratitude' and the flat-out coldness of 'thank you that sent Hagar spinning into a bright blue place where the air was thin and it was silent all the time" (99). Hagar's spin into "a bright blue place" is a kind of psychic suicide flight similar to Robert Smith's leap off of No Mercy hospital; prey to her "anaconda love" (128), she begins to stalk Milkman on a regular basis with ice picks and hunting knives. Eventually he forces a final showdown, and when she proves unable to kill him with a knife he cuts her down with the most brutal remark in the novel:

"If you keep your hands just that way," he said, "and then bring them down straight . . . you can drive that knife right smack into your cunt. Why don't you do that? Then all your problems will be over." He patted her cheek and turned away from her wide, dark, pleading, hollow eyes. (130)

As Barbara Cooper notes, one implication of his statement is that he denies responsibility for his part in Hagar's
breakdown, further separating himself from the emotions of other people: "With these words, Milkman makes Hagar's misery her own choice; thus, he absolves himself of duty" (149).

Part of Milkman's personal fragmentation and lack of accountability may be traced to his fragmentary experience of the names and the stories behind his family, items whose importance Morrison emphasizes throughout the novel. Because of this fragmentation, more than any other character, he lacks a tie to an ancestor figure, a lack which Morrison herself links to personal and social chaos in African-American heritage: "it was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray" (Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" 342). Milkman learns from his father that the family name—Macon Dead—stems not from the concern of a parent who names "at birth with love and seriousness" (29) but from the indifference of a drunk Yankee at the end of the Civil War when Milkman's grandfather went to register with the Freedmen's Bureau. The Yankee wrote all the information down in the wrong spaces, giving him the ludicrous name "Macon Dead," which is subsequently passed to son and grandson. Milkman asks his father why his grandfather kept the name, if it was wrong,
and Macon says that his mother hoped it "would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (54). Indeed, it does that to some extent, as Jan Styrz comments: "{the name} remains a dead blank, a careless inscription that was actually an erasure' (36)--it severs the family's tenuous and critical link to the past without removing the pain of injustice.

In addition to his random family name, Milkman experiences a memory flashback where he remembers that his own nickname is the result of similarly disturbing circumstances, Ruth's nursing of him long past infancy. At the time he recalls the memory, he finds he is walking down a crowded street, where everyone else is going the opposite direction, and the other side of the street remains completely empty. Milkman's isolation (he is traveling a purposeless course against the stream of people) and his lack of willpower or drive, shown by the fact that he "never once wondered why he did not cross over to the other side of the street" (78) symbolically represent his moral aimlessness. Just as when he was a small boy, Milkman makes an attempt at relating to his past by turning to Guitar for support and passively allowing Guitar to interpret the story of his life. Guitar tells him that "[n]iggers get their names the same way as they get everything else--the best way they can. . . . The best way is the right way" (88). Still,
Guitar, himself fragmented, cannot rejoin the indifferent Milkman to his family or community, and without true stories, genuine names, a link to other people, Milkman's life remains in a pilotless state.

* * * * *

The break in Milkman's life, and the initial impetus that propels him out of his perpetual adolescence towards a search for purpose and maturity, comes, paradoxically, after he hears another fragment of the past from Macon. Like many of Macon's stories (such as the one he tells about Ruth), its veracity is doubtful and subjective. Nevertheless, its subject is a commodity equally riveting for father and son: gold.

Macon and his sister Pilate lived on a farm until their father was gunned down by greedy whites and the two children were forced to flee into the wilderness. Macon, who is estranged from Pilate, tells Milkman how he and Pilate split after their father was murdered. Hiding in a cave, Macon and Pilate had been surprised by an old white man, who Macon killed--in part in vengeance for his father and part out of fear. Next to the man he finds a shallow pit filled with "pigeon-breasted" bags of gold: "Life, safety and luxury
fanned out before him like the tailspread of a peacock" (172). Macon, tempted by a false vision of escape into luxury—"the tailspread of a peacock"—tries to take the gold, but Pilate, adamant that appropriating the gold is stealing, threatens him with a knife and compels him to take flight. Now, fifty years later, on hearing that Pilate has a green sack hanging in her house, he is convinced that it contains the gold. He entices Milkman with a vision of escape and flight: "Macon, get it and you can have half of it; go wherever you want. . . . Get the gold" (172).

Milkman, entranced by the possibility of escaping from a world in which he sees himself as "abused" (123), allows himself to be talked into robbing his own aunt, Pilate. Lacking the drive to act alone, he seeks Guitar to share in the adventure: "Guitar could still create the sense of danger and life lived on the cutting edge . . . with Guitar as his co-conspirator, Milkman could look forward to both fun and fear" (177).

Far from dissuading Milkman from burglarizing Pilate's house, Guitar covets the money as much as Milkman does, and for reasons of his own. As the two men have grown up, they have also grown apart to embrace different, though equally destructive lifestyles: Guitar, always the executor of the pair, has joined a secret radical group, the Seven Days,
which attempts to murder whites in retribution for the murders of blacks. Guitar is the "Sunday Man"—an ironic title considering the religious overtones of the name—and he wants to avenge four black girls killed at a Sunday service by killing four white girls in return. To do so he needs money.

What neither man realizes is that their common lust for gold accentuates the fact that both have allowed their identities to be shaped in response to warped segments of white culture: Guitar's as an angry reflection of its violence, Milkman's as an indifferent reflection of its self-absorption, and both men's as a self-glorifying reflection of its vanity. Guitar, for his part, tells Milkman that white violence "is just depravity that they try to make glorious, natural. But it ain't. The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (157)—an argument which ominously mirrors the genetics arguments advanced by white racists against blacks. Although Guitar says that "[i]t takes a strong effort of the will to overcome an unnatural enemy" (156), the willpower of the entire organization is in fact deformed as a mimetic response to white crime: As Guitar discloses, when a black is hanged, murdered, burned or raped, his society aims to hang, murder, burn or rape a white in retaliation.
Milkman, for his part, is interested only in his own shallow pleasure:

It was true that he didn't concern himself an awful lot about other people. There was nothing he wanted bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience himself for. He was bored. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all. (197)

Morrison, reiterating the flight motif, symbolizes the vanity of both men in the form of a white peacock they see as they plan the robbery--perhaps the same peacock that spread its tail before Macon in the cave. The peacock, like Milkman and Guitar, is male, "the only one that got that tail full of jewelry" (178); it is white, signifying the false allure of materialism offered by the white-dominated society; and also symbolically, it is unable to fly successfully, as Guitar notices: "All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). Rather than interpreting Guitar's insight as applying to themselves, they instead plunge into a pursuit of the peacock:

But the bird had set them up. . . . they began to fantasize about what the gold could buy when it became legal tender. Guitar, eschewing his recent asceticism, allowed himself the pleasure of waking up old dreams. .
. . Milkman wanted boats, cars, airplanes, and the command of a large crew. (179)
At the same time they are fantasizing, they are deceiving each other about the true nature of their dreams: Guitar's mind is "on the wonders of TNT" (181) and Milkman, more than ever, dreams of a kind of burdenless escape coinciding with the American journey myth.

Milkman and Guitar enter Pilate's house and steal her sack, but their attempt at theft ends in disgrace when they are arrested by the local police, who discover that the sack contains rocks and bones, the legacy of Pilate's travels. It takes both Macon and Pilate, who does an "Aunt Jemima act" (209), to get them released. And though Milkman does not quite admit it to himself, he is dependent for his freedom on the family he eschews.

The final impetus that drives Milkman out of his passive state comes through his sister Lena. Just as he used his cousin Hagar for his sexual pleasure and his aunt Pilate for material gain, so he uses his mother and sisters as his personal domestic servants. Milkman depends on the women in his family to be female spectators to his male life, their passive female dependency highlighting and validating his male freedom. Finally disgusted, Lena breaks her usual female silence, turns her characteristic absence
into a fierce presence and forces Milkman to confront his destructive use of his family, especially its women, by adding her own piece to the story of Milkman's and the family's past:

"You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, judging us. Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. . . . [T]o this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. . . . Where do you get the right to decide our lives? . . . I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs." (215)

In her outburst, Lena connects Milkman with Macon and holds him responsible for the destructive effects of patriarchy on her life, on her sister's and mother's lives: "You are exactly like him . . . You are to blame. I hope your hog's gut stands you in good stead, and that you take good care of it, because you don't have anything else" (216). The habitual family roles are reversed; it is now Milkman, the male, who is silent in her female presence. Her final command, to "get out of my room," Milkman speechlessly accepts as "good advice" (216). He closes the door behind him--and opens the door to a journey that takes him beyond the confines of his previous life.
Like *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* is divided into two parts, and also like *Sula*, the first part closes when a character departs on a identity-defining voyage. However, where Sula's identity search is unsuccessful and is not documented in the novel, Milkman's journey is critical to his character development as both a man and a human being, and consequently the entire second half of the novel is shaped around his travels. Ironically, his male journey of self-discovery proves successful only because of the help of women in general--and one woman in particular, his aunt Pilate. Pilate serves as the mythical guide, the ancestral figure, the wise woman who provides the moral framework--however much ignored in Milkman's city life--which makes self-discovery possible when he finally undertakes his journey into a new lifestyle.

Milkman first encounters his aunt when, as a child, he disobeys his father and visits her house on the sly. Pilate, who lives with her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar and makes a living by bootlegging wine, is revealed as an strikingly free character whose unconventionality and inner warmth draw the lonely and lost--like her nephew Milkman--to her door. Pilate's commanding presence awes
Milkman nearly into silence when he first meets her. Nevertheless, she stings him into speech:

"Ain't but three Dead's alive." [Pilate said]. Milkman . . . heard himself shouting, "I'm a Dead! My mother's a Dead! You and him [Macon] ain't the only ones!"

Even while he was screaming he wondered why he was suddenly so defensive--so possessive about his name.

(39)

Milkman himself does not comprehend the reasons behind his brief outburst, but it is the beginning of his education about the importance of names, and the importance of identity, that he will eventually learn from Pilate's values.

Pilate awakens Milkman to other possibilities as well. He finds a sense of peace in her house he has encountered nowhere else in his tortured young existence. "[I]t was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. . . . He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud" (47), a stark contrast to Milkman's silent and unhappy home.

Pilate's impact on Milkman exemplifies her nurturing powers, her ability to simultaneously challenge and affirm those around her. Their initial meeting also constructs the
framework of their relationship. Although Macon denies her abilities as irrelevant, Pilate offers Milkman a channel to the kind of moral and spiritual knowledge he will need in order to become a complete human being. Her role as a teacher stems from her extraordinary wholeness, from her supernatural wisdom about the important things in life: relationships with people (Harris 114). Her view that life's purpose is to relate to others contrasts strongly with Macon's assertion that one's primary life goal should be to "own things" (55).

From her very birth, Pilate possesses magical qualities. We are told that she "had come struggling out of the womb without help" after her mother died in childbirth and that "her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel" (27). Numerous critics have remarked that her lack of a navel aligns her with the only other woman in history without one: Eve. Thus, Pilate is elevated beyond the merely idiosyncratic to the archetypal (Harris 92): in a very real way, she fosters the life that surrounds her in this inner-city house, redolent with the uncharacteristic smells of pine and blackberries. Like the first woman, Eve, Pilate creates her own identity and her own role in a world given over for the most part to men. Like Eve, she faces vilification for her independent
role--significantly, Macon calls her a "snake" after reminiscing about the prelapsarian days of their childhood together in Pennsylvania (53-54).

Pilate's acquisition of the mythical and ancestral framework on which she builds her life--and upon which Milkman eventually learns to build his--has its basis in a journey of her own. Defying expected social conventions, Pilate finds the essentials she needs to live a meaningful life through a journey in which she creates her own distinctive identity. The catalyst that propels Pilate on the journey is her adolescent discovery that her unique stomach makes her an object of fear, separates her from the human community, and forces her into the role of pariah. A fifteen-year-old girl, she is cast out from the group of migrant workers with whom she had been living:

She thought it [her lack of a navel] was one more way in which males and females were different. Until now she had never seen another woman's stomach. And from the horror on the older woman's face she knew there was something wrong with not having [a navel]. (143)

Having already lost her father, who was murdered by his white neighbors, and Macon because of his lust for money, she is left profoundly alone in a hostile world.

Pilate, craving companionship, begins a journey in a
manner which prefigures Milkman's journey--she heads south to find her "people," the family to whom she is connected by blood, if nothing else. She never finds her family, and she learns along the way that her belly irrevocably segregates her, even sexually, from an already segregated black population:

[Men] were terrified of fucking her--a woman with no navel.

They became limp even, or cold, if she happened to undress completely and walked straight towards them, showing them, deliberately, a stomach as blind as a knee.

It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people . . . (148)

Pilate faces a choice: either to allow herself to be labeled, marginalized forever as a freak, or to carve out a new capacity for herself:

Finally Pilate began to take offense . . . she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. . . . [H]er alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and--the consequence of the knowledge she had made up or acquired--kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people. (149)
Free from social constraints, Pilate lives an unhampered, original life as a winemaker, a healer, an peacemaker, yet—in comparison to Sula, a pariah in a similar social situation—Pilate's life is also rich in compassion for the very people who have betrayed her: "She was a natural healer, and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them" (151). She lives on the fringes of societal acceptance, but nevertheless never allows herself to be marginalized. As Rigney writes, "Morrison's conjure women live always on the edge of both black and white cultures, relegated and sometimes confined to the wild zone, their magical powers thus contained but never completely dissipated" (67). Thus, Pilate, like Sula, ends up deriving her power from her pariah status.

Pilate, unlike Milkman, is supremely conscious of the importance of a name, both as a signifier for self and a connector with the past. Her own name resonates with an irony characteristic of her role. The biblical Pilate, for whom she is named, judges and betrays; Pilate, on the other hand, affirms and aids. Pilate owns her name, literally as well as figuratively (Stryz 33). Her father, illiterate, chose it at random from the Bible and carefully copied it on
a scrap of paper, and Pilate wears this scrap as her only ornamentation, keeping it in her mother's brass snuffbox she has made into an earring. Her attachment to her name is indicative of her strong physical link to both her history and her ancestors.

Though Pilate's wanderings may seem aimless, they contain elements of her purposeful nature. Pilate travels with a geography book and a sack containing a rock from each place she visits, and these two possessions symbolize her paradoxical ability to simultaneously achieve rootedness, as shown by the solid weight of the rocks, and freedom, as displayed by the multicolored states in the pages of her book. On the urging of her father's ghost, she also picks up the bones of the man Macon supposedly killed in the Pennsylvania cave. She carries his remains with her as a sign that she accepts responsibility for his death, even though, as the narrator tells us "she had struck no blow" (147)--a gesture which emphasizes her personal empathy and accountability. Pilate's journeying ends after the birth of her granddaughter, Hagar, who Pilate senses does not have the temperament to live an experimental life. Her final trip again follows the tenuous thread of family bloodlines, and she settles in the Michigan city where Macon has made a home.
Overall, Pilate's journey assumes a form antithetical to that of the typical American journey and runs completely contrary to the myth. Her journey begins when she is forcibly cast out from a society she embraces; the typical journeyer--such as her nephew Milkman--flees to escape a society he sees as evil or constraining. Unlike the excursion of the mythical journeyer who tries to discover an identity apart from the human community, Pilate's travels signify her struggle to forge an identity and a role in relation to the black community, as difficult, painful and fragmentary as such a relationship might be. The final step in her journey, its termination, is a gesture of generosity and love for her granddaughter Hagar (who Pilate recognizes as lacking her own strength and vision), a sacrifice unmatched by the shortsightedness of the mythical journeyer who focuses solely on himself. The net result of Pilate's efforts is her exceptional grasp of the intricacies and demands of human relationships. In my estimation, her mastery of relationship is unmatched by any other character in Morrison's fictions.

Pilate's strong relationship to her nephew Milkman actually begins before his birth. Even after her brother Macon has rejected her a second time, Pilate stays in the city out of compassion for Macon's wife Ruth, "who was dying
of lovelessness" (151). Pilate gives the sexually bereft Ruth an aphrodisiac which results in the conception of Milkman. Macon, furious, attempts to induce Ruth to have an abortion—until Pilate intervenes. Literally as well as spiritually, then, Pilate represents the life-giving and sustaining force which shores up Milkman's life.

As he grows up, she continues to fulfill this role in his life, a role in which Ruth and Macon fail so miserably. Pilate is the one "who cooked him his first perfect egg, who had shown him the sky, the blue of it, which was like her mother's ribbons," the one, who, significantly, "told him stories, sung him songs" (210). Even though the adult Milkman ignores the importance of her stories and songs, he grasps that she possesses a wisdom he lacks—especially about the importance of naming to personal identity. Drunk and joking with Guitar, he ironically lights on a course his sober self would do well to take: "Pilate knows. it's in that dumb-ass box hanging from her ear. Her own name and everybody else's. Bet mine's in there too. I'm gonna ask her what my name is" (89).

After his and Guitar's failed burglary attempt on Pilate's home, for the first time in his life, Milkman diverges from his father's ethical code and feels shame for his greedy actions. Milkman begins to recognize that
Pilate's influence on him, previously ignored, has been a contributor to his identity and his very existence:

Something like shame stuck to his skin. . . . Shame at not just her Aunt Jemima act but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it--for him. For the one who had just left her house carrying what he believed was her inheritance. . . . [I]f his mother was right, this old black lady . . . had brought him into the world when only a miracle could have. (211).

*     *     *

As he sets out on his journey, Pilate's influence and example, her songs and stories, prove to be a powerful guide. Nevertheless, Milkman's original impulse for his journey is a selfish and self-deluding one. He and Macon conjecture that if Pilate does not have the gold, it must still be in the Pennsylvania cave where she left it. Milkman decides to seek it alone, without Guitar, reiterating his old theme of escape:

[When he talked to Guitar just before he left, the wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him. Lena's anger . . .
Ruth's stepped-up surveillance, his father's bottomless
greed . . . he knew he was fed up. (221)

Guitar, for his part, fails to understand Milkman's desire to "go solo", or as Milkman says, to "live my own life" (220). For Guitar, Milkman's drive for independence serves as a threat to both their friendship and to Guitar's desire to "keep the racial ratio the same" (223) by killing whites, since to lose Milkman would be to lose his financing. To Milkman's query as to why Guitar trusts him, Guitar responds, "Baby, I hope I never have to ask myself that question" (225). They slap hands as usual on parting, "but the touching of the palms seemed a little weak" (226). The initiation of Milkman's search for an identity separate from Guitar's signifies the beginning of the breakdown of their friendship.

The first leg of Milkman's journey, traveling to his father's boyhood home, has the effect of stripping his veneer of city toughness and fashionable boredom as it subtly begins to alter his mental attitudes. Simple as it may seem, his first challenge is to reach out to a stranger for help:

Milkman felt as awkward as he sounded. He had never had to try to make a pleasant impression on a stranger before, and did not remember ever asking anybody in the world how they were. I might as well say it all, he
thought. "I could use your help..." (229)

To his delight, he is received as a kind of native son, due to his blood bond to his father and grandfather. The old men of the town accept him, because, as they say, they know his "people." For the first time, Milkman learns the importance of having "people": it means "links" (229), relational connections to other human beings—a value that Pilate has emphasized.

Also for the first time, his family history comes alive for him as something other than a slightly sentimental collection of fireside tales. He feels a connection between his life and the stories told him by Pilate and Macon, and he actually listens to the stories of the old man who says he knew the Dead family (234). Really listening to the stories provides him with insight, as he begins to understand how racism—in this case, the murder of his grandfather—had warped his father's character:

Now [Milkman] knew that [Macon] had been saying—[t]hat he loved his father; had an intimate relationship with him; that his father loved him, trusted him, and found him worthy of working "right alongside" him. "Something went wild in me," he'd said, "when I saw him on the ground." (234)

Milkman even begins to tell his own tales to the old men:
however, they remain a reflection of his preoccupation with material things: "He bragged [about h]ow many houses his father owned (they grinned); the new car every year (they laughed); . . . Milkman found himself rattling off assets like an accountant, describing deals, total rents income, bank loans . . . " (236).

Milkman then visits a decrepit mansion in order to find Circe, an ancient servant who delivered Pilate and Macon (literally as newborns and figuratively from their father's murderer), since he thinks she may know how to find the cave. She is a surreal character with even stronger mythological overtones than Pilate, and Milkman's encounter with her drives him into a female world his rational mind denies. Her witch's domain is controlled by matriarchal magic and flavored by the drives of dreams, a world perhaps meant to mock Milkman's singleminded materialism. Though over a hundred years old, she speaks with the "strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl . . . it was awful listening to that voice come from that face" (240). Milkman, accustomed to using women for his own ends, finds himself dependent on that haunting voice and that surreal woman to obtain what he desires. Just as in his robbery of Pilate, he uses deception to get it.

Nevertheless, Circe, like Pilate, provides him with a
spiritual link to the past that proves far more valuable than his fool's hunt for gold. She gives him names--the name of his mother, and the name of the place where his "people" originated.

Macon leaves Circe and, clad in his suit and Florsheim shoes, tramps into the wilderness to find the cave. In the process, he falls into a river, signifying his baptism into a new kind of existence. He also shatters his watch, splits his shoes, tears his shirt and pants; the forest, anything but welcoming, scours away the evidences of his materialistic existence. His long trek forces him to feel hunger for the first time, and to appreciate the work of another woman he disdained, his hostess in town. "He thought of the breakfast food Mrs. Cooper had put before him, which had disgusted him then" (253).

The cave itself, while seeming to offer Milkman the gold which he associates with "candy and sex and soft twinkling lights" (251), instead proves to be a false illusion of flight into the world of luxury: "There were no little pigeon-breasted bags of gold" (252). As he decides to keep pursuing the gold to Virginia, at last he is honest with his reasons why: "The fact was he wanted the gold because it was gold and he wanted to own it. Free" (257). However selfish, it is his first glimmer of self-knowledge.
Once he reaches the tiny town in Virginia where the Dead family originated and where he thinks Pilate may have taken the gold, he once again is jolted into perceiving himself and his connections to others in a fresh and disturbing way. His habit of using people and his self-indulgent outlook (expressed in his crass desire for "a place to stay, some information and a woman, not necessarily in that order" [267]) provokes a verbal skirmish and then a full-blown brawl--knife vs. broken bottle--with one of the younger townsmen. The struggle for male domination inherent in the fight struck this reader as a kind of parody of macho morality. The narrator underscores the ludicrous nature of the violence by its equally ludicrous termination; once again, Milkman is saved by women: "[Milkman] probably would have had his throat cut if two women hadn't come running in screaming . . . " (268).

Once the physical fight is over, Milkman is challenged again, this time by the old men of the town, who invite him on a night hunt. The men collectively serve as the male ancestor Milkman lacks, and they move him out of his "perversely extended, narcissistic childhood" (Byerman 74). During their preparations for the hunt, the old men divest him of his city clothes and supply him with new ones: "They outfitted Milkman completely, laughing all the while at his
underwear, fingerling his vest . . . When Milkman was dressed in World War II army fatigues with a knit cap on his head . . . the revelry mixed with meanness abated" (270). By stripping his clothes, the old men simultaneously strip Milkman of his old identity, finishing the process begun by Circe's wilderness.

Out in the woods, Milkman proves unable to keep up with the group. Left alone in the dark, he ponders on his life and--in contrast to the fractured reflection of himself he contemplated in his bedroom mirror at home--he sees a complete picture of himself for the first time:

Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others . . . apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved--from a distance, though--and given what he wanted. . . . Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness. (276-77)

Milkman's acknowledgement of his exploitation and irresponsibility make him appreciate a quality the old men possess and he lacks: "an ability to separate out, of all the things there were to see, the one that life itself might depend on" (277). His elementary acquisition of this
ability as he listens to the wilderness saves him--barely--as Guitar, who has followed him, unexpectedly tries to strangle him from behind a tree, but armed with his new knowledge, Milkman escapes unharmed.

The hunt ends with the successful killing of a bobcat. As a symbol of Milkman's acceptance into their midst, the old men offer him the chance to seize the prize, to pull the heart of the bobcat from its chest. Milkman's taking of the bobcat's heart shows his new possession of his own heart and his commitment of that heart to his community. His vanity, signified by the narrator's reference to the white peacock and its false flight, slips away at the end of the scene: "A peacock soared away and lit on the hood of a blue Buick" (283).

As another indication of their acceptance of Milkman, the old men point him in the direction of a woman, Sweet, who'd be "proud to take [him] in" (285). As evidence of his newfound maturity, Milkman views her neither as an object of dominance or a sexual conquest, representing an entirely new chapter in his relations with women. In a rather comic conversion from his former role, he performs the kind of domestic services for her that he disdained to do for his mother or sisters at home: he scours the tub, makes the bed and washes her dishes voluntarily and without complaint.
Milkman's journey, by this point, has been subtly transformed from a search for gold to a search for a more precious treasure--his family history. He realizes that to learn the story will provide him with the family roots he needs in order to find peace within his own roles as nephew, son, brother, grandson, friend. He must struggle, as Pilate did, to forge an identity in relation with the community, and knowledge of his family's past provides him with the tools he needs.

As he continues to hunt for clues to his family's past, Milkman encounters Guitar again along a deserted road. Their menacing meeting drives home the destructive implications of disconnection from the community; in his search for money and vengeance, Guitar has so separated himself from his former friend that not only does he think Milkman has double-crossed him in the matter of the gold, he has decided that such an action is worthy of death. Guitar's murderous promise highlights the irony of Milkman's situation: at the very moment that he begins to consider the well-being of someone other than himself, he finds his personal existence jeopardized by his so-called best friend.

Before the death-struggle between Milkman and Guitar actually occurs, Milkman manages to piece together the family story that has eluded him for so long. Primed by
Pilate's blues chant "O Sugarman," he recognizes that the children in Shalimar play a game using a similar chant "O Solomon." He discovers that their chant is actually the tale of the life of his great-grandfather, Solomon, who escaped slavery by flying away to Africa, leaving behind wife and his twenty-one sons, the last son of whom was Milkman's grandfather.

Milkman returns to Michigan in high spirits, anxious to tell Pilate the family story and the true family names--names which Milkman, like Pilate, now recognizes as central to the identity of the individual in relation to the community (Byerman 75):

How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names . . . [n]ames that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. . . . He closed his eyes and thought of . . . [t]heir names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. (331)

When he gets to Pilate, she knocks him out with a bottle. Coming to, he realizes why: "Something had happened to Hagar. Hagar was dead. . . . He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead" (332). Indeed she is; like Ryna,
Solomon's wife, who went mad after his desertion, Hagar lost her mind and died after Milkman left her. Milkman thus finds a link between his own irresponsible action and the escapist flight of his great-grandfather. Upon first learning of Solomon's flight, he bragged about it to Sweet; now, in Pilate's cellar, he mulls on Sweet's response, "Who'd he leave behind?" (327): "[Solomon] left Ryna and twenty children. . . . And Ryna. . . . had lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ. . . . !" (332).

Milkman's awakening to personal responsibility, concurrent with his return to his Michigan home and family, brings to completion the search for identity begun as a narcissistic pursuit of cash. As part of his newfound responsibility, Milkman assumes the psychological burden of Hagar's death. Paradoxically, he frees Pilate from the burden she assumed, "knowing as he now does that the sack of bones belongs not to the white man Macon murdered but to her own father" (Byerman 75).

Together, Pilate and Milkman return to Shalimar to bury her father's bones at the place where Solomon abandoned him, and so to symbolically reroot the family in the firm earth of its true history. As they do so, Guitar shoots at Milkman--and, just as she saved his life before, Pilate
saves it now—the bullet meant for Milkman kills Pilate instead. As she dies, Milkman recognizes Pilate as embodying the spirit of flight, while remaining rooted in her community role and resisting the temptation of escape flight offers. "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Pilate's death comes after Milkman has finally accepted and learned the lessons she taught through her life and which she learned in her own journey. Implicitly, she leaves Milkman as her spiritual heir and the keeper of the family and ancestral traditions—including the tradition of flight. Furthermore, his journey, in which he discovers the family and the story she could not find in her travels, completes and closes the broken circle of the family's identity.

Milkman's final action is perhaps a sacrifice of his own life in an attempt to extricate the community from the mixed poison of hatred and love in which Guitar has entangled it. He meets Guitar, "brother man," (53) in a death-embrace, where either—or both—will be killed. Carefully phrased as the conclusion is, it becomes impossible to determine whether Milkman has literally flown to meet the challenge; as the narrator says, though, "it did not matter . . . For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337). As a
complete human being, Milkman openly faces the possibility of "surrendering" his personal aspirations for the community good--and in doing so, like Pilate, he has learned to soar.

* * *

Topically, the initial portion of Milkman's journey, where escape is his goal, fits the American journey paradigm. However the results and conclusion of his journey transform it from a story of escape into a story of definition and commitment. The American journey myth is specifically contradicted in the novel by the implicit contrast between Milkman and his great-grandfather: Milkman's journey specifically reverses and erases the irresponsibility of Solomon, whose escapist flight is shown as wreaking destruction on his family, especially his wife. Unlike the traditional journeyer--like Solomon--who leaves community for good, Milkman returns home with a sense of responsibility he utterly lacked at the outset of his trip. Overall, the form of Milkman's journey counters the mythic form in that it "chronicles a movement from isolation to community" (Mason 183).

The list of women who aid him on his journey is extensive: Circe; the women who interrupt his fight in
Shalimar; Vernell (a Shalimar woman who remembers his grandmother's name); Sweet; Susan Byrd, a distant relative in Shalimar who gives him valuable clues to his family's past; and most of all, of course, Pilate, the woman who provides him with the names, stories, songs and values he needs in order to piece together the family history and his own identity. Morrison uses Milkman's treatment of women as an indicator of his maturity, and as he develops, his personal progression can be traced through his indifference to his mother and sisters, his cruelty toward Hagar and his betrayal of Pilate during his emotionally "Dead" years—to his emotionally mature compassion for the women in his immediate family, his acceptance of personal responsibility for Hagar's death, and his reverence for Pilate's gifts. The journey chronicled in Song of Solomon is undertaken by a man, but it is circumscribed, upheld, and finally triumphant because of the ineradicable presence of women who form a strong and enduring framework for the community.

*    *
*    *
*    *
*    *
Morrison's fourth book, *Beloved*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize in 1988, is perhaps the most wrenching of her novels. In this work, set in Cincinnati in 1873, Morrison imaginatively probes the experience of ex-slaves as they grapple with the spirit-breaking after-effects of slavery—most particularly its memories. Specifically, the novel's story spreads around the life of Sethe, who, eighteen years earlier as a fugitive slave, killed her own infant daughter to keep her from slavery. At the novel's opening, Sethe dwells in isolation, desperately living in the present, disdained by and disdaining the rest of the black community. She manages alone with her one remaining child, Denver, in a house haunted by the venomous ghost of her slain daughter. Like Sula and Milkman, Sethe lives separated from her community; it is only through a painful process of coming to terms with the past—embodied in the ghost of her murdered child—and the eventual intervention of the community and her daughter that she can manage to reconnect with other people and begin to develop a healthy self-identity.

As in *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, journeys play an important role in determining how individuals shape their identities and how they relate to their communities. However, journeys are absolutely integral to *Beloved* in a
way not realized in the other two novels; for *Beloved's* characters, a successful journey means dealing with slavery in a way that makes a livable future a possibility—in comparison to an unlivable past. Consequently, journeys weave through the stories told by *Beloved's* characters with the relentless rhythm of memory itself. In fact, memory, journey and storytelling are inextricably twined in *Beloved*; one of Sethe's vernacular words, "rememory," embodies this interconnection. Rememory, as Carolyn M. Jones suggests, is "to make an act of the moral imagination and to shape the events of one's life into story" (616), a literal molding of unspeakable, intolerable past experience into a form which can be tolerated and retold. Journeys, at least those taken by *Beloved's* black characters during slavery, are ultimately a flight from destruction to further destruction—throwing into cruel relief the false allure of freedom offered by the American journey myth. These journeys offer so little real freedom that, in order to come to terms with them, Morrison's characters must imagine the spurious hope of the journeys and relive them by expressing their hopelessness and horror. By tracing the memory journeys of individual slaves, Morrison explores slavery on an intimate level: "I was trying to make it a personal experience. The book was not about the institution—Slavery with a capital S. It was
about these anonymous people called slaves" (interview, "A Talk with Toni Morrison"); thus, as the novel progresses, we are exposed to the merciless effects of racial oppression on individuals we come to know and care about—Sethe, Denver, Paul D.

For Sethe, allowing herself to reexperience the her past through rememory eventually leads to a new ability to experience the future. In this way, through the secondary journey of "rememory" and storytelling, the past (though no less terrible) has the potential to become a shared, binding community experience and a vehicle for healing the self. Reliving the past through these "memory journeys" may also prove dangerous, as Sethe comes to understand; the past, with all its shattered dreams, possesses the ability to swallow her up should she linger too long on its atrocities (Harris 167). The difference between the healing journey of rememory and the killing journey of rememory lies in the journeys' different destinations: the killing journey is the American mythical journey in which the traveler moves further and further from the ties of human companionship; the healing journey is one in which the traveler finds a place in the community circle, a goal which flatly contradicts the tenets of the myth.

Sethe's initial, paralyzing isolation, her inability to
make the connection between memory and storytelling, actually stems from the consequences of the first journey she makes in 1855. Readers must piece together the events of the journey, as they are told in a gradual, fragmentary remembrance by Sethe and other witnesses as they grapple with its implications throughout the novel: pregnant, "mashed up and split open" (135) by a beating from her master's nephews, she nevertheless manages to escape from the plantation, Sweet Home, across the Ohio River to the house of her free mother-in-law Baby Suggs, giving birth to her daughter Denver along the way. For a month, she experiences the elusive bliss of freedom at 124 Bluestone Road, Baby's house:

Sethe had had twenty-eight days--the travel of one whole moon--of unslaved life . . . Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. (95)

Her "twenty-eight days of freedom" end when Schoolteacher, her master, comes to reclaim her. Desperate, she uses a handsaw to cut the throat of her "crawling-already?" little girl and tries to kill her other three children and herself
as well to keep them from being returned to slavery.

Sethe's original flight cannot fit the American journey stereotype of escape, because the undeniable reality of the Fugitive Slave Law shows the concept of escape to be a deadly illusion for the slave (Schmude 412). Sethe's and her children's personhoods are denied absolutely by Schoolteacher, who makes a project out of comparing the slaves' human and animal traits; as a result, Sethe's journey is an inversion of the journey myth, since she desperately seeks a society which affirms the human worth of herself and her children. She tries to fly from the moral wilderness, or "jungle," created by slavery:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle . . . But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it.

(199)

From the "jungle whitefolks planted in them," Sethe attempts to preserve herself and her children. However, her bloody response to a journey back to slavery--and even more, her unrelenting insistence on her right to choose that path--paradoxically isolate her from the community she
strives to join. The community's judgement of Sethe's pride is evident in its response to her when she emerges from the woodshed where she killed her child:

Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once . . . Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited. (152)

Nor is the community itself guiltless in the child's death. Envious of Baby Suggs because of the lavish party she threw after Sethe's arrival, members of the black community fail to warn Sethe when Schoolteacher arrives in town. In the other blacks' neglect to inform Sethe of Schoolteacher's approach, in their envy of Baby Suggs' gifts of plenty, they too participate in the murder of Sethe's child (Jones 617). Furthermore, their refusal to comfort Sethe signifies their resistance to accepting their culpability, a refusal which ironically mirrors Sethe's own. As a result, the "waiting" stretches into years as the black community and Sethe lock each other into a battle of spiteful willpower.

The community, outraged by Sethe's pride in killing her daughter more than by the desperate act itself, makes her a pariah in the same way the Bottom made a pariah of Sula, and
Sethe, for her part, offers her community a kind of indifference similar to Sula's. Unlike Sula, however, who interacted with her community through her pariah role, Sethe's pariah role robs her of the audience for her story of personal tragedy and heartbreak, and so leaves her bereft of a means for dealing with her past or reliving her journey. Sethe, shrinking from recalling "the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (5) avoids telling her story and maintains her proud isolation. However, by refusing to be an audience for her pain, the community imprisons her in static non-interaction, never giving her the opportunity to deal with her past in a straightforward way. In doing so, the community also cuts itself off from its own healing and strengthening gifts, and, like Sethe, it accepts a diminished and cheapened role.

As a result of this dual estrangement, life for Sethe becomes a constant battle to keep the past at bay, even down to her daily chores like making bread: "Working dough. Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73). The only complete story Sethe can muster the strength to tell is the story of her daughter Denver's birth, and the only person there to hear it is Denver herself. Incidentally, Denver's birth occurs in the middle of Sethe's journey, and
so avoids, to some extent, the horror at the journey's beginning and end. Like the ghost of her own infant daughter, trapped in perpetual silence and stagnant horror, Sethe is trapped in silence, unable to progress beyond her memories of slavery—-and her inability to move forward is signified by her single complete story, and the rambling fragments of the rest.

Denver, the audience for this single story, is similarly entangled and isolated. Sethe claims to want to protect Denver from Sethe's own vividly horrible past, since Sethe sees it as an entity which could swallow Denver in the same way it threatens to swallow her: "[I]f you go [to Sweet Home] and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you. . . . Because even though it's all over—-over and done with—-it's going to always be there waiting for you" (36). Sethe's stern drive to protect Denver, however, strands Denver in a fear-filled, lonely, love-starved existence. Denver's refusal to hear stories other than the one about her birth displays her fear, born of the enshrouding ignorance in which Sethe has wrapped her: "Denver hated the stories her mother told which did not concern herself. The rest was a gleaming, powerful world made more so by Denver's absence from it" (62). Similarly, Denver, like her mother, lacks a future. When another child
asks about her sister's murder, Denver goes deaf for two years and refuses to leave her house and yard, responses which symbolize her entrapment in the fear and violence engendered by slavery. Denver's reaction also demonstrates her inability to face her mother's murder of her baby sister--admitting Sethe's act would be an acknowledgement that Sethe might somehow be driven to kill Denver too.

Further isolating Sethe, even from herself, is her lack of a coherent personal identity, a characteristic the importance of which Morrison demonstrates for Sula and Milkman and which is shown to be equally important for Beloved's characters. Sethe's lack of a complete identity is evident in her self-images, which are based solely on her status as mother, an attachment which is keenly ironic, since it is in this capacity that she kills her daughter. Even when frightened about her own perilous health on her flight from Sweet Home, she refers to it as "concern for the life of her children's mother" (30), and talks of herself as "this baby's ma'am" (31). Sethe identifies herself exclusively with motherhood as a response to slavery's inherent denial that any black woman can be a mother--schoolteacher, for instance, calls Sethe the "breeding one" and refers to her children as "foals." Thus, Sethe's desperate resistance to being cast as a breeding
animal causes her mothering to swallow up other parts of her personhood. Morrison herself speaks of Sethe's one-dimensional image of herself as a source of conflict:

[She must] consider the possibility of an individual pride, of a real self which says "you're your best thing." Just to begin to think of herself as a proper name--she's always thought of herself as a mother, as her role. (interview, "In the Realm of Responsibility"

251)

Until Sethe can think of her whole self as worthwhile, not just her mothering as worthwhile, motherhood controls her actions so much that it dominates her in the same way that it dominated the life of her murdered child. For Sethe, a healing identity integration can only occur after she has faced, through rememory, the consequences of her killing journey.

The first step for Sethe out of her multiple isolation, and for Denver as well, occurs with the arrival of Paul D, another of the former Sweet Home slaves. Paul D appears at Sethe's house after years of aimless wandering--the kind of traveling that appears concurrent with the ideology of the American journey myth. However, Paul D himself is so fragmented by the unexpressed savageries of slavery that his physical wandering is symptomatic, not of unfettered
freedom, but rather of his desire to escape slavery's lingering mental terrors. He is enslaved, ironically, by his desire to escape slavery. As he tells Sethe: "If all the truth be known, I go anywhere these days" (11), and as he thinks to himself, "If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up" (10). Yet he agrees to stay, and his presence serves as a catalyst for the bubbling over and telling of Sethe's (and his own) excruciating memories. His appearance at Sethe's house, 124 Bluestone Road, signifies him as a potential audience, a potential lover, a potential bridge back to the black community and a potential fellow traveler on the treacherous paths of remembered journeys, one who promises to make the journey safe: "Jump, if you want to, cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles. Make sure you get back out" (46). Sethe does not quite believe that he can make her rememory journey safe, as the question mark at the end of her statement indicates: "Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?" (20). She cannot trust even Paul D with the weight of her past.

Yet together, with each other for an audience, they do manage to deal with some of their unvoiced past by relating
as much as the mind can bear (and no more): Sethe tells Paul D about slavery's ultimate negation of her motherhood when schoolteacher's nephews held her down and took her milk with their "mossy teeth"; Paul D tells Sethe about slavery's ultimate negation of his human power to speak, to narrate his story, when schoolteacher "gave him the bit" (71). Superficially, as they successfully deal with these bitter revelations, Paul D, Sethe and Denver appear to be building a future together. A happier time seems tantalizingly near when the trio makes a trip to a nearby fair, as Paul D begins to reconnect Denver and Sethe with the black community: "[t]here was something about him that made the stares of the other Negroes kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces" (48). As the three of them walk, Sethe sees what appears to be their three shadows holding hands and decides, tentatively, that "it was a good sign. A life. Could be" (47).

Yet the darker reality for Sethe is that the deepest, most divisive memory of slavery's effects--her murder of her own child--has merely been driven underground to erupt with suppressed violence onto a deceptively peaceful scene. Sethe's act of murder, which is as yet "unspeakable and unspoken" (to use Morrison's terminology), cannot be made livable until she retraces its path; until she does, the
illusion of a better life is as insubstantial as her vision of shadows holding hands.

Sethe's progress along this memory journey, for better or ill, is traced through the physical manifestation of the ghost of her daughter. Initially, with Paul D's arrival, he banishes the destructive baby ghost through a display of manly physical force, when he gets into a smashing contest with it. Outdone in physical violence, it disappears—or so it seems. Like Sethe's memory of the murder, however, it is merely driven away temporarily, to return later with an emotional vengeance.

Significantly, the ghost reappears as a nineteen-year-old woman the very evening that Sethe, Denver and Paul D return from the fair, and so begins to disrupt the tenuous future they have just begun to construct. From the beginning, Sethe and the strange woman are irrevocably linked in a mother-daughter bond by birth and water imagery. The narrator tells us that "[the] fully dressed woman walked out of the water" (50) and went to sit on Sethe's porch. Like the "water breaking from a breaking womb" (50), Sethe feels an unbearable urge to urinate the minute she sees the face of this visitor; simultaneously, the visitor drinks cup after cup of water. The bond is sealed by the woman's name as she spells it out: "Beloved," the as-yet unspoken
identity of Sethe's "crawling-already?" girl and Denver's dead sister. The sudden appearance of this woman, though disturbing to Paul D, is received with calm acceptance by both Denver and Sethe, who welcome her into their home without further question. Consciously (in Denver's case, because of her loneliness) or subconsciously (for Sethe, who needs to confront her murder [Schmudde 414]), they have summoned Beloved's ghost—and as the folklore of the slaves stipulates, the dead do not return unless they are compelled (Atwood 146).

Beloved's role in the household, like the roles of memory and storytelling themselves, is subject to the interpretation of her audience—in this case, Denver, Sethe, or Paul D—and, at least in the beginning, she has some positive effects. Denver initially interprets Beloved's presence as that of an audience willing to listen to her, and as such Beloved provides the vital link to another person that Denver has been craving. For the first time, Denver begins to tell a story, the tale of her birth, to another hearer. Contrary to the narrator's claim that "[Sethe] alone had the mind for [the story] and the time afterward to shape it" (78), Denver herself imaginatively creates the narrative of her birth, "construct[s] out of the strings she had heard all her life a net to hold Beloved"
(76). Beloved, the audience, joins in the storytelling, and the two girls follow the "strings" of Denver's tale on the memory journey that initially belonged to Sethe. By claiming the story for themselves, the two become linked to a healing part of the past, a part characterized by the miraculous hands of the white girl who delivered Denver from Sethe's womb, and Sethe from death.

Beloved, who wants to hear her own story as much as Denver wants to hear hers, also serves as an audience for Sethe by asking questions which prompt Sethe to relate untold stories about her slave past. Sethe, to her surprise, actually finds pleasure in the telling:

Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed her, because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. But as she began telling, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's . . . thirst for hearing it. (18)

Sethe even tells a story in which she reveals her incomplete and tragic relationship with her own mother, who was hanged until her body was unrecognizable. The telling of the story propels Sethe farther into repressed memories and she realizes that slavery negated her mother's parenting role towards Sethe, just as slavery negated Sethe's parenting
role toward Beloved. As yet, though, Sethe is unable to articulate the anger which such memories generate, signifying her own continuing inability to confront the extremes to which slavery drove her.

As for Paul D, Beloved causes him also to embark on the journey of rememory and return to "some ocean-deep place he once belonged to" (264). Although he recognizes her as a threat to the life he and Sethe wanted to begin together, and though he resists her mentally, she nevertheless draws him into a sexual union that somehow opens up the "rusted tobacco tin lodged in his chest" (113) that he thinks he maintains instead of a vulnerable human heart. Born of the breaking and killing of the other Sweet Home slaves, of the time he spent in a prison camp, of his five futile escapes from slavery and of the bit that schoolteacher gave him, the tobacco tin symbolizes Paul D's resistance to loving too much and his commitment to living cautiously: "By the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry [the tobacco tin] open" (113). Yet somehow, intercourse with Beloved--symbolizing, perhaps, the primal "hunger for life" (264) Paul D once possessed--priess up the resistant lid:

[H]e didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made . . . as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it.
. . . he was saying, "Red heart. Red heart," over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. (117)

Shameful as it is for him to sleep with her, Beloved forces this "awakening" of Paul D to his suppressed human desire for life, twisted and subverted by slavery for so long.

But with Sethe's continued neglect of her most horrible story, especially her failure to tell it to the man with whom she intends to build a "life," Beloved also comes to symbolize the destructive power of the past. Stamp Paid, the old man who delivered Sethe into the black community nineteen years previously, shows Paul D a newspaper clipping about Sethe's killing of her child. Ironically, by his interference, Stamp Paid severs Sethe's relationship with the last member of the community who accepts her. Coming home, Paul D asks about the clipping. Sethe has never felt compelled to explain her motivations to anyone before, but she hopes Paul D will understand the motherlove that drove her and that he will accept her choice. "[C]ircling him the way she was circling the subject" (161), she relives the horrific journey for him and tells the tale at last, finishing with her rejection of Schoolteacher and the slavery he represents: "I stopped him. . . . I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (164). Paul D, scared
because "this here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw" (164) rejects both Sethe's story and his role as audience, and so rejects Sethe herself. Like Schoolteacher, he casts her as an animal:

"You got two feet Sethe, not four," he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet. . . .

Later he would wonder what had made him say it. How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. . . . "So long," she murmured from the far side of the trees.

(165)

The trackless forest between them, based in part on the gender gap arising through Sethe's claim of motherhood, definitively separates Sethe from Paul D, woman from man, storyteller from audience, individual from community. Paul D's subsequent exit from 124 fits the American journey stereotype of escaping from a tough situation rather than facing it, and the bitterness of his flight is reflected in Sethe's disillusionment.

Left alone, with no hope of community audience or escape from her memory, Sethe succumbs to the dangers of unregulated remembrance as she sacrifices her future to her obsession with the past. Up to this point, while a life with Paul D remained a possibility, Sethe had resisted
recognizing Beloved as her daughter even though she had been dreaming Beloved's face for years (132). Manifesting her surrender to the perils of rememory, after Paul D leaves Sethe consciously acknowledges Beloved as her daughter returned from the grave and chooses to seal herself off from the world beyond the immediate circle of her daughters and herself: "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be" (183). Denver yields easily to this new arrangement; struggling to retain Beloved's affections and terrified that her mother or sister will leave her, she has no reason to maintain a connection to the community beyond her yard. Beloved herself, obsessed with Sethe's smile, has no interest in anyone but her mother.

Together, the three women, consumed by their various passions, form an alliance of three--as shadowy and fragile an alliance as the first one formed by Paul D, Sethe and Denver. The women's severance of even the last vestiges of community ties and their refuge in isolated obsession is sensed by Stamp Paid: the old man, representing the black community, tries to enter 124 but finds the door closed to his knock. Intertwined though the women's lives are, their connection is based on the desire to escape the past through possessing each other rather than on their ability to serve
as a healing audience for each other's stories. Even at the
end of part two, when their voices seem to integrate into a
threnody written almost as an interwoven song, they appear
not to be speaking out loud, but rather in a thoughtchorus:
the words are not made substantial, but remain in the
nightmare realm of unvocalized fears and desires, as Stamp
Paid observes: "Mixed in with the voices surrounding the
house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were
the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts,
unspoken" (199).

From their tenuous unification at the end of their
thoughtchorus, where they are united in their desire to
possess—"You are mine You are mine You are mine"--the
alliance unravels as Sethe and Beloved focus increasingly on
each other, and Denver finds her worst nightmare coming true
as both mother and sister slip away from her. Sethe herself
claims not to need rememory anymore since Beloved has
returned (191), but contrary to her claim, she feels
compelled to explain to Beloved, over and over again, her
choice to kill her:

[N]o one, nobody on this earth, would list her
daughter's [animal] characteristics . . . This and much
more Denver heard [Sethe] say from her corner chair,
trying to persuade Beloved, the one and only person she
felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love. (251)

In the course of her desperate explanations, Sethe locks herself firmly into the most brutal and horrible part of her past, living her decision over and over again, journeying over and over again the hellish road inscribed by slavery—the harrowing consequence of her years of emotional repression and isolation.

Choosing to experience her memories as one solitary person rather than sharing them, Sethe has truly lost contact with any promise of redemption offered by the world outside, a redemption she desperately needs. The one person with whom she does try to share them is Beloved; but Beloved, representing the child lost to slavery and the unanswerable, unlivable past, is incapable of serving as a healing community audience. She does not accept the choice Sethe feels compelled to explain; Sethe might as well not tell the story at all. Instead, Beloved takes in return for her death what Sethe can no longer withhold from her—Sethe's own life: "[Sethe] sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (250). Metaphorically, Sethe becomes increasingly consumed, to the
point of insanity, by her inescapable memories.

* * * * *

Finally, Denver, the miraculous child who escaped death twice through others' intervention into Sethe's life (first by Amy Denver who delivered her, then by Stamp Paid who pulled her from Sethe's murdering arms in the woodshed), finds the courage to ask for outside intervention once again. Her home in shambles, the relationship between Sethe and Beloved twisted into a grotesque distortion and herself excluded from their increasingly insane circle, she must venture out to save herself and Sethe as well from the bleak reality of starvation. "She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (243) Frightened and alone, Denver travels into the future through her own link with the past--her grandmother Baby Suggs, the prototypical ancestor figure, the preacher who saw her teaching turn to dust at the hands of white people, the woman who laid down and died when she could neither condemn nor approve Sethe's "rough choice" (180). Baby's presence has been conspicuously absent from a house filled with growlings from the other side, and in Beloved as in Song of Solomon, the absence of
the ancestor figure causes disarray. However, Baby's ancestral spirit returns at this critical juncture to guide Denver into a world offering both horror and hope:

Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched, her heart kicked--and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything . . . But you said there was no defense [Denver thinks]. "There ain't," [Baby answers].

Then what do I do?

"Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on." (244)

For Denver, the act of leaving her house and yard assumes the status of a major journey. Unlike the journeys made by Sethe and Paul D during slavery, however, her journey contains within it the seeds of real hope and growth; contrary to the American journey myth's goal of dividing individual and community, it is successful because it reforges the broken chain of communication which links individuals together in society. Denver finds herself the recipient of gifts of food, and more than that, the donors reveal their names to her, signifying their identities within the community and their acceptance of Denver into that community.

Denver's journey is so successful in reconnecting 124 to the outside world that it causes two other healing
journeys to occur, both of which help provide Sethe with the community audience she needs to regain her sanity and set her past to rest. The first journey is made by a group of women from the black community, the very women who were instrumental in ostracizing her for eighteen years: "Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. . . . In any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to them to have run its course" (249). Though they feel Sethe brought her bad luck on herself, they nevertheless realize that "[w]hat's fair ain't necessarily right" (256). One woman in particular, Ella, recalling her own tortured past, comes to realize that the community owes Sethe the opportunity for personal redemption. Since Sethe's self is lost in the wilds of her own rememory, the community is obligated to help her free herself from the past:

Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present. Sethe's crime was staggering and her pride outstripped even that; but she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving in on the house . . . The future was sunset; the past something to leave behind. And if it didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out.

(256)
As a group, the women travel out to 124 Bluestone Road "to stomp out the past" and begin to sing, weaving the "cloak of sound" they denied Sethe the day she killed her daughter. Sethe, who had been chopping ice for Beloved, stops to listen:

[T]he voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

The women, enclosing Sethe in a baptism of sound, literally offer her the chance for rebirth (Scarpa 99). Simultaneously, in a bizarre reenactment of the murder sparked by schoolteacher, Sethe--confusing past and present--is thrown into a second murderous frenzy by the approach of a white man she thinks is schoolteacher (actually the owner of 124 coming to pick up Denver for her first job). Once again, Sethe fears for Beloved, and once again, she attacks. But in a reversal of her previous action, this time she directs her violence at the man she thinks is Schoolteacher rather than at her own child. This time, Sethe herself is saved from the consequences of the
attack by Denver and the women of the community, who tackle her before she can kill. As several critics have noted, Sethe's act of redirecting her anger and hatred towards the figure of the slave owner exorcises her original violence towards Beloved (Jones 619, Schmudde 133); likewise, the community's actions in restraining and protecting Sethe exorcise its original malignant neglect to aid her when schoolteacher arrived. With this reversal, "[t]he past is undone; the power of the ghost is broken" (Schmudde 133), and Beloved disappears. Sethe's journey of rememory is completed with this reenactment. Its conclusion is made possible by the community as a concerned, healing, and vitally involved audience.

As Carolyn Jones points out, however, Sethe is not yet completely healed: "[O]n the level of community, rememory is accomplished. Still, Sethe is not yet saved. She can hate the master, but she cannot love herself" (619). In order to love herself, Sethe needs to formulate the personal identity she has been lacking, an identity overshadowed for over eighteen years by her engrossment in her motherhood role. By herself, though, she is unable to pursue a new identity: robbed of Beloved, who she insists was her "best thing," Sethe gives up on life and takes to the bed where Baby Suggs died after she too gave up. Once again, Sethe's
isolation is broken by community intervention as Paul D returns to her, bringing with him hope for the future. He makes a second healing journey as Denver cautiously invites him back to 124. This journey is the antithesis of his escape journey, since it leads to a relationship and a commitment; drawn by his love for Sethe, "[h]is coming is the reverse of his going" (263). He too wants a reenactment, a reversal of the past, a chance to make a path through the silent forest that sprang up between them when he fled from Sethe's story. His dialogue with her emphasizes his perception of her value and humanity, obviating his earlier comment that she had "two feet, not four":

Her hair, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spreads and curves on the pillow . . .

"I'm a take care of you, you hear? Starting now. Stay there. Don't move. Let me heat up some water."

He stops. "Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water?"

"And count my feet?" she asks him.

He steps closer. "Rub your feet." (271-272)

Paul D offers Sethe a possibility for the future, one in which both of them--so battered by the past--may find an integrated identity and a healing, concerned audience, as he
demonstrates through his thoughts:

    Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood.
    . . . He wants to put his story next to hers. . . .
    He leans over and takes her hand. "You your best
    thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are
    holding hers.

    "Me? Me?" (273)

Sethe's questioning "Me? Me?", disbelieving as it is, nevertheless indicates her awakening to new possibilities within herself. In spite of its tentativeness, like Nel Wright's realization at the end of Sula, it signifies her opportunity to forge an identity. Sethe's final interrogative signals an opening of her mind's vistas beyond the bleak valleys of the past, beyond the treacherous journey of remembrance and into redemption at last.

    Just as memory's journey is ambiguous, however, so is the emotional climate at the conclusion of Beloved. The final two pages of the novel are a haunting, elliptical eulogy to the ghost, the child who is "disremembered and unaccounted for" (275). There are suggestions throughout the novel that Beloved is a composite symbol representing more than one individual victim of slavery; as Denver says, "At times [I think she was my sister]. At times I think she was--more" (266). Beloved's portion of the eulogy suggests
that she possesses collective memories of the slaves, "sixty million and more" (Morrison's dedication), who died on the journey from Africa (Scarpa 93-94). Embodying these slaves and their memories, Beloved represents the ancestors whose deaths make them irrecoverable, the millions whose stories may never be "passed on" (275): "By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there" (275). At novel's end, Sethe's discovery of her self-identity mingles with the certain and permanent loss of all identity for these unclaimed dead, who are recalled only through the shifting ground of "shaped and decorated" tales and the stories culled from the parts of memory's journey so painful that "remembering seemed unwise" (274). Paradoxically, Beloved itself, anguished, ambiguous, hopeful, is Morrison's tribute to these sixty million and more; her act of storytelling--arching over the forgetfulness of her characters--finally and powerfully reclaims the terrible journey of the lost and forgotten dead.

* * * *
Guided by her artistic vision, Morrison takes her readers on journeys to destinations undreamed of by the stereotypical American journey myth. Sula, Nel, Milkman, Pilate, Paul D, Denver and Sethe—all of these characters make journeys which subvert and challenge the myth which "narrates . . . the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves" (Baym 71). The journeys of Morrison's characters, whether they lead to fulfillment (as in the case of Milkman or Denver), death (as for Sula), or both (as for Pilate), all carry the common theme that individuals may not exist in a meaningful sense outside of their societies. Even in the case of Sula, who abandons her home ties absolutely for ten years, the journey ultimately leads to the sometimes sustaining, sometimes strangling embrace of the community. Morrison's novels emphasize that there is no escape from the relational responsibilities of living with others.

And therein lies the critical sociological—as well as literary—importance of Morrison's use of the American journey. Her construction of the journey provides a vitally different path from the one promoted by the mythic values of the dominant class informed by white male values. The
dominant American consciousness, as a whole, envisions "the typical fiction of escape [as] a motivational building towards the culminating act of breaking out" (Stout 31-32). Novels such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Moby Dick, stories such as "Rip Van Winkle," embrace this philosophy and are in turn embraced by the literary canon as the truest representations of what it means to be American: should society prove too much, one can "light out for the Territory" like Huckle Finn (Twain 449), disappear for twenty years like Rip van Winkle, or escape to the sea like Ishmael; supposing, of course, that one is male, white and free. Furthermore, the journey myth is based on the assurance that isolation and self-interest are not only viable alternatives, they are desirable ones. However, such prominent sociologists as Robert Bellah suggest that America's acceptance of the cult of individualism lies at the heart of some of our most pressing social problems:

[Bellah] identified the disease that's corroding the nation: Unchecked individualism, with little regard for anyone beyond the self . . . "[O]pporunity always needs to be balanced with community. And, without community, opportunity just starts spinning out of control, and can become totally self-destructive," [he said]. (Sawyer-Allen and von Sternberg, 9A)
In stark contrast to the individualist view, the journeys made by Morrison's characters irrevocably circle back to other people. Certainly, this alternative contains its fair share of ambiguity; Morrison's smaller communities must live within the constraints and problems, the racism and sexism of the larger American society in which they exist, and like many communities, hers absorb the poisons of the world around them. Flawed as they are, though, they contain within them a vitality and humor, a survival instinct, an enduring cultural richness supported by the experience of a shared past. As such, they offer a needed antidote to the isolated individualism to which Americans, especially of the dominant class, seem prone.

Morrison, who herself states that "[e]ventually individualism fuses with the prototype of Americans as solitary, alienated and malcontent" (Playing in the Dark 45) takes pains to portray characters whose struggle is not to escape society but to rather to forge out a meaningful identity within it. As Morrison has said about Beloved, "Nobody in the novel . . . survives by self-regard, narcissism, selfishness. . . . It never occurred to them that they could live outside [the community]. There was no life out there, and they wouldn't have chosen it anyway" (interview, "Talk with Toni Morrison" 235). I would venture
to say that such a way of living is frequently more mature than the much-avowed American practices of escapism and isolation--and like Sethe's ultimately affirming experience in *Beloved*--it results in both a more fully developed human being and human community.

Moreover, Morrison's novels call into question the veracity--and the universality--of the journey myth in the first place. Writing from her own avowed status as a "black woman writer," her novels explicate and validate a perspective on American life marginalized by generations of literature using black people as mere objects for signifying the white consciousness:

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has clearly been the preserve of white male views . . . [that those views] are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. (*Playing in the Dark* 5).

Through the journeys enacted in her literature, Morrison places the black consciousness of community alongside the consciousness of individualism enacted in white literature. In a country in which black people have made up a significant portion of the population for over 400 years, the inherent contrast between ideologies challenges the
prevalent assumption that the American journey myth, embracing escape and isolation, is our most significant literary heritage. I hope that Morrison's compelling portrayal of a different national legacy, one which ultimately embraces all members of the human community--not just the dominant class--may come to supplant the segregating mythic journey to which American society still clings.
Endnotes

1. Christian notes that Hannah’s death was preceded by a dream of a wedding, a dream whose significance Eva fails to interpret until later. With appropriate irony, Christian draws a parallel to Nel’s wedding:

   [Nel and Jude’s] wedding becomes the event in the
   Bottom, bringing together the community in a moment of
   feasting, revelry and renewal. But Eva has already
told us . . . a wedding means death . . . not only for
   Nel and Sula’s girl friendship but for Jude and Nel’s
   previous sense of themselves. (162)

2. Examples of criticism which explore Milkman’s journey include Jan Styrz’s discussion of the journey’s circularity; Barbara E. Cooper’s analysis of the connection between Milkman’s journey and his growing sense of family values; Keith E. Byerman’s treatment of Milkman’s journey as a mythic quest; and Melvin Dixon’s consideration of the connection between flight and journey.
Acknowledgments

Several people deserve greater recognition than just a few lines on one of the last pages of this thesis; I hope they realize just how indebted I am to them for their help.

S. Nancy Hynes, who served as my overall project advisor, gave generously of her time and provided me with invaluable insights. She was my toughest critic—and most ardent supporter—through this year-long project. I cannot thank her enough for agreeing to advise me.

Fr. Mark Thamert and Dr. Madhu Mitra, my readers, struggled uncomplainingly through rough drafts and the (terribly long) final product; both of them aided me in refining my ideas and my writing.

My roommates Karen Pfeilsticker, Marie Axtmann, Michelle Auers and Becky Harter deserve a round of thanks for listening to me complain about how many times my disks crashed and for putting up with stacks of books in the living room and practically everywhere else as well.

Maria Gallegger of Academic Computing struggled valiantly for nearly an hour and a half to rescue my files from a hopelessly corrupted disk; Dan Besemann used up gigabytes of hard drive space, I am sure, saving a copy on to his computer.

Finally, I need to thank Beth Clysdale, Marlo Weber and
Jill Funk for their ready support during the frustrating parts of this project.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Byerman, Keith. *Fingering the Jagged Edge: Tradition and*


30.


Interview. "Toni Morrison: A Writer in America."
Otten, Terry. The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni
Rigney, Barbara Hill. The Voices of Toni Morrison.
Sawyer Allen, Martha, and Bob von Sternberg. "Prophet who
pinpointed our national disease offers a grim
Scarpa, Giulia. "Narrative Possibilities at Play in Toni
Schmudde, Carol. "Knowing When to Stop: A Reading of Toni
Smith, Barbara. "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism." The
New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature
Stout, Janis P. The Journey Narrative in American
Styrz, Jan. "Inscribing an Origin in Song of Solomon."
Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. New York:
Works Consulted


Vickroy, Laurie. "The Force Outside/The Force Inside: Motherlove and Regenerative Spaces in Sula and