

5-2019

# De-Centering the Bildungsroman: Identification, Trauma, and the Female Double in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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De-Centering the *Bildungsroman*:  
Identification, Trauma, and the Female Double in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* and  
Toni Morrison's *Sula*

An Honors Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Bates College  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
By  
Lily Kip  
Lewiston, Maine  
March 20, 2019

This project would not have been possible without those that stood behind me and weathered the hurricane of this process over the past nine months.

Thank you to my parents, for their support and providing me with the privilege and opportunity to pursue my passions. Thank you to Oliver, whose continual partnership and encouragement contradict most of my argument. Thank you to Chandler and Olivia, the fellow bottom-dwellers of our strange small apartment. Thank you to all of those who have populated the first floor library tables and kept me laughing these last several months.

Thank you to my classmates who have challenged me, the Bates Summer Research Fellowship which has funded me, and all of the professors who have taught me over the past four years.

Thank you to Professor Sanford Freedman for his indispensable guidance in the first half of this project and thank you to Professor Sue E. Houchins for her faith in my work, fierce wisdom, and incredible influence on my academic career at Bates.

This thesis is dedicated to my own girlhood double, Brianna.

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## Introduction

*“The fact is, I remember them only in my body. I cannot quote a single line from them, and I have not ever felt the need to return to them physically, though I know that I always return to them as I write.”*

Dionne Brand, *Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*

This honors thesis will examine Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1961) and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) through the lens of gender, sexuality, and race using psychoanalytic theory to reinterpret the *bildungsroman*. Juxtaposing two mid-twentieth-century American women’s novels enables me to displace the individualist definition of the classic white male coming of age plot to center the plot on women’s narratives. I hope to refigure the term for an accurate representation of mid-century white and Black women’s development. I have taken Diana Fuss’s theory of queer “identification” as the starting point for my readings of both novels (*Identification Papers* 1995). My interpretations will focus on the double and the Black girlfriend, patterns of violence, Catherine Belsey’s work on cultural ideology (*Critical Practice*, 1980), and semiotic theory.

The male *bildungsroman* emerged around the eighteenth century in German literature. In *The Female Bildungsroman*, literary critic Pin-chia Feng draws on Wilhelm Dilthey’s original definition of the term as “a linear progression toward knowledge and social integration, and an upward movement toward spiritual fulfillment” (2). Of course, the coming of age tale is not specific to German culture or to men. In the British and American traditions, women’s novels of development have tended to act as prescriptions for ladylike conduct. They were subtle but potent indoctrination of heteronormative, middle-class, white behavior and outlines of ladylike conduct as subtle but potent

indoctrination of gender norms. Literary theorist Annis Pratt suggests that early versions of the female *bildungsroman* “prescribed submission to suffering and sadism as an appropriate way to prepare a young girl for life” (13-14). “Life” in this context, means heterosexual marriage and submission to men. The marriage plot thus became the dominant form of women’s *bildungsroman*. Jane Austen’s novels are the most prominent examples of this sort of text. Pratt contends that Austen’s work depicts women “growing down” rather than growing up (14). She argues that nineteenth-century fictional representations of women are treatises on how women should become objects rather than subjects, for women’s development was stunted and regressive. However, critic Susan Rosowski, in her essay on “The Novel of Awakening,” presents the view that Austen’s protagonists are capable “of dual movement, both inward to self-knowledge and outward, toward awareness of social, ethical, and philosophical truths” (67). Perhaps this is the case. Austen’s heroines do ‘succeed’ by the parameters of Regency-Era England, attaining the highest level of female embodiment in marrying financially upward. But Austen’s novels still outline the path of respectable and economically sound matrimony, not necessarily self-development. The marriage plot posits itself not as a developmental narrative but as a narrative space where characters make concessions, compromises, and figure their way into economic comfortability (Pratt 15).

Over time, women writers began to move the female coming of age story away from the marriage plots. The of the “awakening” emerges towards the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Rosowski defines the novel of awakening through a “protagonist who attempts to find value in a world defined by love and marriage” (49). The protagonist of this type of novel is typically a white married woman of some means who

“wakes” to the limitations of her gender and her marriage. The character’s development “is inward, toward greater self-knowledge and subjectivity” which results in a “revelation of the disparity between that self-knowledge and the nature of the world” (49). The character discovers that marriage does not and cannot provide a happy ending. Rosowski focuses on 19th and some very early 20th century novels: Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Willa Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy*, Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth*, and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. In a majority of these works, the character turns to suicide as the answer to the pain of being “awakened.” Rosowski comments on Chopin’s *The Awakening*: “For only by complete isolation of self can Edna be truthful to her inner life. Any contact with external reality threatens this dream” (54). The character’s inner world becomes incompatible with reality, and so in order to maintain a loyalty to the self, she must die. Protagonists who do not die, and in the nineteenth and early twenties there are few, find “resolution only at great cost. . . she must deny one element of herself” (68). Death, which represents the maximal loss in these narratives, also presents the most introspective act that a character may take within the narrative form.

In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women begin to survive their narratives. These novels end neither in death nor in marriage but by looking toward and uncertain future. This form applies to both men’s and women’s coming of age texts. The postmodern coming of age novel centers on the individual, following meandering and convoluted narrative arcs. Nicholas Donofrio, in “Esther Greenwood’s Internship” cites *The Bell Jar* and *The Catcher in the Rye* as novels that “deserve to be read as failed *bildungsromans*... because they ultimately decline to narrate their protagonists’ passage into romantic and professional maturity” (241). Donofrio also concedes that for the female protagonists of Austen, Bronte,

and Eliot, “mentors are hard to come by, lessons appear more coercive than educational and mastery is rarely achieved” (243). To define the *bildungsroman* in such stringent terms thus excludes a long history of women’s coming of age texts, none of which end neatly in the independent adulthood of the male protagonist.

By this contention, no woman’s narrative and more so no non-white person’s narrative, can ever be a *bildungsroman*. Ideological constraints for young white women, and young women and men of color prohibit ascension into “romantic and professional maturity.” The so-called “maturity” is one only accessible to privileged white men. Donofrio does admit that depicting *The Bell Jar* and *Catcher in the Rye* as failed “is therefore to insist on a very specific definition of failure indeed,” and proposes classifying *The Bell Jar* as a modern novel of the internship—which is a definition still limited by class (247). If the *bildungsroman* genre cannot even include quintessentially white male texts such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, or texts of white female privilege such as Austen’s work or *The Bell Jar*, then the term itself has failed—not the novels. Perhaps the coming of age narrative should not need to follow the limiting linearity of Dilthey. Rather than create subcategories, the shifting the definition of *bildungsroman* to encompass marginalized perspectives is necessary. Reading *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* as *bildungsroman* within the context of the gender and race principles which govern Esther, Nel, and Sula’s development permits a de-centering of the term from its white male origins.

My de-centering of *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* also relies on a reading of the texts through “identification” forming rather than “identity” building. Identity operates in classical as is a perceived endpoint or goal. Identity is not a plausible term for the fluctuating conception of the human self. For this reason, this thesis will rework the *bildungsroman* along the lines of



the “identification” theory first employed by Sigmund Freud and later appropriated by Diana Fuss in her text *Identification Papers* (1995).

Identification more accurately describes the ongoing process of self-creation in the individual as a subject. Where identity is constructed on the basis of “facts” about the self, identification arrives on the basis of relations to external experiences. Fuss defines identification as “the psychical mechanism that produces self-recognition” and the process which “inhabits, organizes, instantiates identity” (2). She analyzes and reworks Freud to produce a more socially accurate definition based in queer theory and avoids Freud’s more homophobic, misogynistic, and racist pitfalls. Freud bases his identification theory upon an assumption of gender and sexual binary, which Fuss distinguishes as “identification (the wish to be the other) from sexual object-choice (the wish to have the other)” along the lines of a male/female dichotomy (11). In a world where sexuality and gender are far more complex than Freud ever could have predicted, identification based on a binary is not a reasonable explanation. Such a binary pathologizes homosexuality as confused “wish to be other” (to be like someone of the same gender) rather than “wish to have other” (wish to have sex with someone of the same gender). The subject’s desire for one sex can only be secured through a corresponding identification with the other sex, coexistence of the two “would be a logical impossibility for Freud” (67). As a foundational assumption, it is of course a tenuous one at best. On the basis of queer theory, Fuss problematizes this assumption and postulates that the two concepts may be entangled, if not one and the same (11). This interpretation of identification deconstructs Freud’s rigid gender binary and his reasoning for pathologizing homosexuality. According to Fuss, all desires are mixed with identifications, and all identifications are somewhat desirous. She understands desire as

instrumental in the creation of self and subjectivity. Identification follows the logical transference of “she is X, therefore I am X” as persisting to, “she is X, I desire her, therefore I am also X.” If “identification is the mechanism Freud summons to keep desire from overflowing its socially sanctioned borders;” then it is the mechanism that permits the reading of female protagonists’ development (45). Aligning identification with queer desire de-centers the developmental plot of the *bildungsroman* from its heterosexual origins.

In seeking to use identification as a means of understanding and interrogating the women’s *bildungsroman*, this thesis will integrate psychoanalytic readings of race and queerness in the texts with specific emphasis on “ideology” in literature. Ideology is the grounding space of human psychology and social phenomena which both questions and substantiates the discourse of a text. British literary critic Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, draws on the work of Louis Althusser to define literary ideology as producing “the *relations of production*, the social relationships which are the necessary condition for the existence and perpetuation of the capitalist mode of production” (56). Ideology is the human symbol system of linguistics which describes human relationships between self and world, self and community, self and other, the “condition of the action,” which produces “identification with the ‘I’ of the discourse” (62). Ideology coerces the writer into perpetuating and engaging with it. Divorcing literature from ideology is therefore an insurmountable and useless task. It is the work of the critic to dig through a text to discover ideology. But reading for ideology is not the same as reading for intent. Rather, the process of analyzing ideology “is not inevitable, in the sense that texts do not determine like fate the way in which they *must* be read” (69). Although ideology informs a reading, it does not mandate it. The meaning making of literature is an ever-fluid process of exchange between

reader, author, and language. Perhaps this sounds familiar—the work of reading is itself a work of identification between reader and text.

Therefore, Belsey calls for the reader to pay close attention to the “conventional” ideology of texts. She states that she is “concerned at this stage primarily with ways in which they are conventionally read” and how meaning can be lifted from them (69). In general, a text will refer to a conventional ideology, because a specific person in a specific context wrote the text. Belsey provides the (apt for the purposes of this project) example of “women as a group” who, in the context of dominant culture, “are both produced and inhibited by contradictory discourses” (65). This unmarked “woman” of Belsey’s participates in both “the liberal humanist discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality” and also “the specifically feminine discourse offered by society of submission, relative inadequacy and irrational intuition” (65). She does clarify that a generalization as such is quite broad, and although it is a summary of the demands of womanhood—she is not entirely wrong. Most individuals reflect the intersection of a number of contradictory discourses that produce the ideology by which they live. Ideology is always present in the text, always producing and obscuring meaning. Reading becomes a matter of excavation through layers of ideology and language to determine what *work* a text does, what cultural significance it produces.

Reading *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* both within and against their respective ideologies is crucial to a sensitive and thorough analysis. As a white twenty-first-century woman performing a reading of texts outside the dominant ideology of my own time and race, deference to ideology and background historical content is necessary. This permits a reading that derives not from my personal positionality, but from my training in careful

reading and my education in English critical analysis. Valerie Smith, in “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the ‘Other,’” describes the term “black feminist theory” as not dependent on the positionality of the theorist, but “a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and” particularly the middle “class in modes of cultural expression” (370). Reading texts with Black feminist theory or with attention to the intersectionality of race and gender is a process of educated analysis. With this reasoning, despite my personal positionality, I hope to read *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* in terms of their race, gender, and class inscriptions in accordance with their historical contexts. I hope to discern how both support and resist their dominant ideologies within and outside of to their dominant ideologies.

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* was first published in 1963 under the pseudonym “Victoria Lucas,” exclusively in the United Kingdom, and just months before Plath’s suicide. It wasn’t released in the United States until 1971. The book garnered attention due to its obvious basis in autobiography and the pre-existing sensation of her suicide. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, is a white, middle class, nineteen-year-old girl from an unnamed suburb of Boston, Massachusetts, whose story and biography closely mirrors the events of Plath’s life and background. Plath’s life allows for some degree of assumption about Esther. Where the text is vague, it is easy to determine where Plath is drawing from in her autobiography, which makes a reading based in Plath’s life tempting. Jacqueline Rose, in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, suggests that Plath’s famous suicide “engenders a literary movement constituted in the very image of her death” which either “destroys the culture” or operates as “the precondition for the culture to survive” (23). Often for readers,

her death either substantiates the meaning of her texts, or ruins it by obscuring the impressiveness of her writing in autobiography. Tomasz Fisiak characterizes the novel as a “feminist autobiography” in his work “Feminist Auto/biography as a Means of Empowering Women”: “The usage of the auto/biographical mode is just one of the main components to gain autonomy through writing... To liberate one’s voice, the author creates a distinct written self (fictive or not) that gains control over her production” (190). Fisiak’s alarming commentary pays no notice to the fact that *The Bell Jar* is deliberately categorized as a piece of *fiction*. Thirty years earlier, critic Henry Schevy called for a separation of Plath from her text, calling it an “almost impossible task” of saving “the tale from the Plath cult which threatens to obscure the quality of the writing with biographical detail” (18). Plath’s intent is not unimportant, but in the case of a text which autobiographical reading is so easy and so damaging, it should be treated with great delicacy. Rather, the cultural and ideological context should be afforded more attention.

A holistic understanding of 1950s ideology per Belsey’s suggestion is necessary in order to parse the meaning making of *The Bell Jar*. Linda Wagner-Martin, in *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties*, turns to Plath’s political ideals to contextualize the novel, “She voted for Adlai Stevenson (though her mother voted for Eisenhower) and lamented the McCarthyism, isolationism, and conservatism that had become pervasive American attitudes” (5). The politics of both Plath and the fifties situate *The Bell Jar* as pushing against the constraints of culture and questioning the role that a (white) woman can play in American society. Wagner-Martin’s remark that “the assumption was that every person alive was heterosexual, and the birthrate rose incredibly” during the decade in question, is also quite potent in light of a reading which factors queer desire into the text (5). This is

partially what makes Esther such an interesting albeit greatly flawed character. Esther stands outside of 1950s heterosexual ideology by avoiding marriage, engaging in extra-marital sex, and pursuing a career in writing. At the same, she is privileged, petulant, and racist in a number of instances across the novel. *The Bell Jar* is progressive for illustrating a young woman who breaks the mold of white feminine norms, but it is regressive in the ways that it does not. This reading will thus examine how much Esther's identification centers on her whiteness and her privilege. I will seek to consider both the successes and the shortcomings of the text in thereby de-centering the *bildungsroman* by reading Esther as a character simultaneously resistant and loyal to her ideological context.

*Sula* (1973) is Toni Morrison's second novel. The text follows the development of two young Black girls in the "Bottom" a neighborhood in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. *Sula* escapes the ascription of authorial intent readings. But as a Black as well as female writer, Morrison falls under a different sort of scrutiny, described in a quote by Alice Godfrey in "The Black Women Who Wrote America's Earliest Autofiction": "black women's literature, particularly autobiographies, has too often been subject to severe criticism, such accounts often being deemed too personal, or not political enough" (Kazeem). *Sula* is often reductively taken as a text about female friendship, rather than social and political positionality. Given the white supremacist ideology of American culture, Black women's writing always already stands outside of the dominant discourse and is forced to make its own spaces. Morrison asks about "literary blackness" in the "Preface" of *Playing in the Dark*, "What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level *always* conscious of representing one's own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be 'universal' or race-free?" (xii). This question uncovers the tension

of between Black authorship and the white reader with the dominant white readership in the context of America. Surrounded by an ideology of self vs. other and white as “unmarked,” Morrison questions the consequences of being a Black writer and performing Blackness for a white audience while at the same time, not watering her writing down.

Which is precisely why *Sula* presents a compelling text to examine for the purposes of reading identification. The Bottom is a Black community positioned up on a hillside, overlooking the white community down in the valley. Nel and Sula’s development occurs in the context of the pre-othered Bottom, inscribed onto their bodies as pre-othered Black women. Where Esther stands outside of ideology by the choice afforded to her as a white woman, Nel and Sula are excluded from dominant ideology of white American culture since birth. Although the Bottom provides an alternative Black ideology, it still conscribes to the heterosexual. Thus, Nel and Sula form their friendship as “creating something else to be”—a third space in which to come of age. *Sula* is not a tale of two different development plots, but of one conjoined one—a “double female *bildungsroman*” as termed by critic Pin-chia Feng in “We Was Girls Together” (39). Each seeing herself in the other, Nel and Sula grow up in an equal exchange of identification. Sula and Nel present precisely the push and pull of identification/desire described by Fuss in *Identification Papers*. Critics such as Barbara Smith (“Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”), Deborah McDowell (“New Directions in Black Feminist Criticism”), and Barbara Johnson (“Lesbian Spectacles”) have presented differing opinions about queerness between Nel and Sula. Toni Morrison disagrees with any implications of queer desire, cited as saying “there is no homosexuality in *Sula*” in *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (157). Therefore, reading queerness depends not only on the reader’s definition of desire, but also on a more protean understanding of queer theory.

Lee Edelman suggests in *Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that queer theory constitutes “the site where the radical threat posed by irony” in text, “which heteronormative culture displaces onto the figure of the queer” (24). The queer figure thus becomes the very disfiguration of identity in being deviant to ideological norms. Ideology positions queerness and Blackness as other by the standards of white America. Reading *Nel* and *Sula* through the queer lens of identification creates a developmental reading that has specific grounding in the social/cultural positions of the text.

Both *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* exemplify compelling iterations of a long-standing history of women’s writing. Both novels also depart from heterosexist ideological patterns. *Sula* further departs from white supremacy; *The Bell Jar* does not. This is not to say that these novels are the only novels to depart from these patterns. Rather, I chose these two novels because I have loved them. Both are novels in which I have seen pieces of myself, both are books that have contributed to my own coming of age. In choosing these novels to position against one another, I hope to conduct a thorough analysis of white women’s and Black women’s development in the twentieth century. Reading both novels through the lens of race, sexuality, gender, and culture permits a more open-ended view of the *bildungsroman*. Analyzing these novels through the psychoanalytic lens of identification will produce a more comprehensive perspective on women’s coming of age narratives.



## Chapter I: Hysteria and Serial Suicide in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

*"The patterns of pain in the bildungsroman are embedded in image, leitmotif, and larger narrative patterns; their antitheses are images of desire for authentic selfhood."*

Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Literature*

In her 1995 text, *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss appropriates Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) in order to construct a theory on "identification" that can be applied to present-day psychology. More so than this, Fuss's work makes it possible to apply Freudian theories to literature of young women without resorting to reductive and degrading Oedipal readings and Electra complexes. Fuss's identification reveals a developmental arc that gives ample attention to the gender differences that distinguish women's coming of age fictions from that of men. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud employs the story of a group of sons murdering and cannibalizing their father to explain an Oedipal working of identification (Fuss 32). Fuss theorizes that this story "uncovers the *violence* at the heart of identification" (34). The children destroy the father and orally incorporate his identity into their own. From this Fuss also conjectures the "ambivalence" of identification via the son's simultaneous love of and hate for the father. Ambivalent identifications express how identification travels "a double current, allowing for the possibility of multiple and contradictory identifications coexisting in the subject at the same time" (34). The act of identification is both a murder illustrating hate, and an ingesting suggesting love. As an act of violent identification, the father becomes entombed within the sons, a part of their own identity. Fuss's analysis of this story emphasizes the insecurity of identification in its precarious position at the intersection of love and hate.

The second story that Fuss examines comes out of Freud's *Group Psychology* (1921). In a short passage from the text describing homosexuality in a girl's boarding school, Freud claims that young girls possess a greater ease of identification which leads to homosexual confusion. Young women, by Freud's count, have a greater "'openness' to emotions" which mitigates the hysterical spread of *feelings* (Fuss 114). The terming of homosexuality as "spreading" throughout the girls boarding school proves Freud's effective pathologizing of queer desire as a side effect of female hysteria. Freud thus conflates the medical (at the time) female hysteria with queer desire, setting the precedent by which psychologists will vilify homosexuality for years to come. In several other studies, such as *Dora* (1905) and "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" (1920), Freud uses this same comparison to explain away queerness as a hysterical identification. Fuss describes Freud's belief that women desiring other women confuse the question, "How can I be a woman," with "How can I have one" (29). Where Freud manages to use this "confused" conflation to prove the pathology of homosexuality, Fuss aligns it to re-define identification, suggesting that Freud is correct in the comparison but wrong in pathologizing it. Freud's claims of binary desires are so precarious "precisely because desire and identification cannot be securely separated or easily prevented from turning back on one another" (77). What Freud claims is pathology, may actually be human nature. Identification substantiates desire, and vice versa. The two are interdependent and analogous.

In the clinical sense, hysteria no longer exists. The prescription of the term stems from a failed understanding of women's mental illness, cultural parameters which leave women without voices, and a dismissal of women's physical and emotional pain. While psychologists no longer recognize clinical hysteria, the principle of the phenomenon is still

worth examining for its use in the literary arts. Representations of the woman hysteric reach from madwoman to prophetess: e.g. Bertha in *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Bronte), Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison), Medea in her eponymous ancient Greek drama, *Medea* (Euripides). In linguistic theory, hysteria is a particularly potent device in its semiotic dimensions: "The hysteric speaks through her symptom, transforming the body into a textual utterance. Although the hysteric's somatic symptom ostensibly works to block interpretation... its very unreadability provokes, even coerces a reading" (Fuss 116). Hysteria relegates the subject to the pre-language state of infancy, occupying a form of communication that cannot be read, but *must* be. Elizabeth Grosz engages Julia Kristeva's work on semiotic language in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*. Kristeva believes that hysteria resists the symbol system of human language, because "the symbolic is based on the 'repression' or subsumation of the chaotic semiotic fluxes" (152). Because hysteria cannot be read or logically communicated through human language, it speaks through semiotics, the cries and movements of the pre-linguistic. The semiotic speaks through the "pleasures, sounds, colours, or movements experienced in the child's body" (152). French psychoanalytic feminist Julia Kristeva connects female speech to the semiotic because of the psychological link between mother and child. Ann Rosalind Jones reports Kristeva's belief that women "speak and write as 'hysterics'" and therefore as "outsiders to male-dominated discourse" of the symbolic language of speech (249). Women's texts therefore communicate using both the semiotic and the symbolic. E. Miller Budick, in "The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*" argues that "Plath not only perceives the world in terms of competing male and female languages, but that she herself attempts to write in the feminine" (873). Reading Esther Greenwood's mental illness and suicide attempts in *The*

*Bell Jar* as a hysteria inscribed through the semiotic produces a more nuanced analysis of the text as a *bildungsroman*. Conceding Esther's unreadability as a hysteric character mandates that the critic must read Esther against her own word in order to parse the meaning of the text.

*The Bell Jar's* narration unfolds from the hysteric mind of Esther Greenwood. Esther is not only an unreliable narrator, she is psychologically damaged and suicidal. Per Fuss and Kristeva's theory, this makes Esther an unreadable character who also demands reading. Beyond being an unreliable narrator, she is also a dangerous one due to the autobiographical leanings of the text. Critics of *The Bell Jar* too often rely on content from Plath's life for analysis. Literary scholar Henry Schevy credits Plath's death with the sensationalism and misunderstanding of her work, contending that too many "pay insufficient attention to the division between art and life" (20). Readers look to Plath's dark fictional work and see Sylvia, rather than Esther. It is useful to consider Plath's perspective, but analysis that rests on the novel as an autobiographical work does a disservice to the text. To take Plath, or Esther for that matter, at her word, is to forget that fiction is meant to produce cultural meaning rather than personal. As American Culture scholar Kate Baldwin reflects, "If, as Esther constantly reminds us, she is a master of deception, might it not be important to read her against her word?" (59). Not only can Plath not be used to read the text, but Esther cannot be believed. Baldwin calls for a reading of the text with skepticism of Esther's narrative authority and deference to ideology. Reading the novel from a place of distance while understanding of the specific positionality of Esther as a nineteen-year-old white woman living in New England in the year 1953 will produce the most comprehensive outcome.

Feminist critic Catherine Belsey engages “ideology” as the most useful means of reading cultural meaning in text. Belsey indicates that literature has real world power due to its effects “on the ways in which people grasp themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live” (66). Ideology in literary texts thus becomes critical to determining the action or passivity of a character. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, one of the louder voices in psychoanalysis of the subject in linguistics, believes that subjectivity is constructed through the child’s ability to produce subject-position: identification with first a mirror image (his famous “Mirror Phase”) and then with the first-person singular pronoun (Belsey 60). The child able to produce the mirror phase but unable to enter into the symbolic order of language and the dominant discourse of ideology becomes “sick.” Belsey revises this theory, suggesting that those left out of the dominant discourse (women, people of color, the working class, those positioned as the “other” or “object” in dominant subject positions) are more likely to become sick (66). Therefore, looking to the ways that these characters resist or adhere to ideology, coerces the best understanding of the cultural work of the text.

Against the backdrop of a boiling New York City, the first half of the novel chronicles Esther’s growing sense of listlessness and anxieties about the future. Esther considers normative women’s paths which lead back to her college boyfriend Buddy Willard, or the unorthodox decisions which might bring her to a career writing in New York City. Critics such as Plath scholar Linda Wagner-Martin rest much interpretation on this section: “*The Bell Jar* is plotted to establish two primary themes: that of Greenwood’s developing identity, or lack of it; and that of her battle against submission to the authority of both older people and, more pertinently, of men” (56-57). Wagner-Martin is correct in noting the

novel's careful plotting around this imagery as it is the dominant ideology that makes up the backdrop of the novel. The now famous fig tree metaphor serves this purpose almost exclusively: "I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story..." (Plath 77). Choice itself is a 1950s project for the white person. Even as a working class woman, Esther has the opportunity for upward mobility due to funded education and white privilege. Positioned at a point when women's simultaneous restriction and empowerment left many tied up, Esther finds herself in a position familiar to women of the era. Baldwin characterizes her as "a character who throws herself against the limited options available to her like a furious pinball, aiming for and then bouncing away from discrete targets of female identity" (60). Reading her against the marginalized identities of the narrative—a Russian translator at the UN and the "Negro" orderly at the hospital—Baldwin understands Esther as "the American girl spoiled by choice" and, coarsely, as "a little shit" (71). She is not entirely wrong—Esther's internal career discourse derives from the privilege of choice offered to white women in the 1950s for the first time. Though Esther's family comes from a working-class background, she possesses the upward mobility of the Boomer generation. Her ennui and her depression are privileges.

Esther's anxieties are typical of the 19-year-old girl in the fifties. Women, such as Esther's boss Jay Cee at "Ladies' Day" magazine, were just beginning to move out of the home in small numbers, providing examples and glimmers of hope for ambitious young women. At the same time, "the average age for women to marry" was lingering at "20.3" years old (Wagner-Martin 3). Esther is nineteen at the beginning of the novel and turns twenty towards the end (Plath 203). Her marriage anxieties may seem premature to a twenty-first-century-reader, but a reader in the fifties, Esther's concern is quite warranted.

This cultural background also makes Esther's careful resistance to marriage quite unique. Although Esther does want a family, she questions that desire and rejects Buddy's proposal of marriage which she recounts in memory (92). Wagner-Martin reminds that at the time, "the non-married lifestyle was as suspect as deviant sexual behaviors" (3). Remaining single meant a conscious choice live outside of dominant American ideology of marriage and family. Esther's resistance to ideology positions her as deviant, opening up the space for a queer reading of the text. As Renée Dowbnia notes in "Consuming Appetites," Esther's choice to use "spending money and shopping privileges to buy birth control" rather than buying clothing and magazines places her external to 1950s norms of womanhood (586). In the context of the 1950s, Esther is an anomaly.

Although Esther's decisions make her radical, in the first half of the novel she maintains a loyalty to normative heterosexual desires. Historian Lisa Lindquist Dorr reinforces the point that marriage, gender roles, and the self-sufficient nuclear family were integral to "what made America strong as a superior white nation" over the Russian communists (28). But with the advent of teenage dating and "going steady" in the 1950s, white men also began to pose a sexual threat. Dating was meant as a precursor to marriage—an institution which was becoming suspected as emasculating of the husbands (30). Thus, the media began to perpetuate a narrative of male "sexual aggression" and coercion as necessary for the "masculinity and matrimonial success" of America's young white men (31). At the same time, young women were expected to remain steadfast against the advances of their male partners to protect the requisite purity of white female gender norms. Young women were raised to believe that their intrinsic "value resided in their virtue and attractiveness as a wife," and therefore young women who participated in 1950s

dating culture resented and rightly feared the advances of their male suitors (33). This also places Esther as squarely outside of the dominant ideology of the 1950s, as a woman who is interested in and seeks out extra-marital sexual activity. Though a young, attractive white woman, Esther contradicts heterosexual ideology for her resistance to marriage and interest in heterosexual intercourse.

As noted, Esther's struggle to self-define is a white woman's problem. In the context of the Cold War as well as the boom of fifties heterosexual ideology, "racial others" inhabit the framework of the novel as outside culture as well. Kate Baldwin reads Esther against the more minor but still present racial other characters in the novel who inhabit, "*The Bell Jar* connects the ideas of female discontentment with the Russian and Negro as important players in U.S. Cold War cosmography. It elaborates on the alternative intelligences present in a narrative that also announces a kind of female domestic incarceration" (Baldwin 58). More privileged than but also as equally restricted as the Russian translator Esther sees in New York and the Black orderly she meets much later in the novel, Esther struggles with the confusing positionality of being white and a woman in 1953. She casts about for self, but there is nobody with whom she can identify. In a scene on a date at the United Nations, Esther wishes to physically inhabit the Russian translator but with what Baldwin calls entirely "removed selfhood" (66). She hopes to be swallowed up by the entity of someone else without ever having to know her, a sublimation into someone else like the father in Freud's story of the cannibal sons. Later, when interred at the city hospital in Boston, Esther disregards and mistreats a Black orderly that "her imprisonment in part relies on his" (Baldwin 73). Here too, Esther de-humanizes the racial other for the sake of bolstering her own misery. This thought process was used by America to fight the degenerate home



lives of “others” abroad (the Russian communists) and at home (Black individuals) to maintain the country’s white supremacist ideology. As individuals whose ideological existence in 1950s America relies on an opposition to America’s white national narrative, people of other races occupy background space as objects rather than subjects. The Russian woman and the Black orderly serve as objects for Esther to push up against and consider, but never identify with or even acknowledge as people due to her racism. Though the characters of color in *The Bell Jar* serve to construct the background and provide outlets for Esther to enact the frustrations of being white and female, they remain caricatures taken for granted.

White American ideology relies so much on the exclusion of racial others that such characters cannot even make Esther recognize her whiteness. For the first half of the novel, Esther inhabits the spaces of white women, a women’s college in New England and an all-female summer program in Manhattan. Though women’s spaces, they are not entirely enclosed against men and non-white characters. At college, though surrounded by other college girls; Esther dates Yale medical student “hypocrite” Buddy Willard and outsmarts male professors (Plath 52, 37). The Amazon Hotel in Manhattan where she and the other girls who have won internships at fictional “Ladies Day” Journal live is for young women “with wealthy parents who wanted to be sure their daughters would be living where men couldn’t get at them and deceive them” (4). The girls may be safe within the hotel, but once they venture out into the city, all manner of men abound. Outside the hotel, Esther and her friends encounter types like Lenny Shepherd the radio personality, Constantin the simultaneous interpreter, and the Peruvian date rapist Marco (11, 51, 103). Each appearance triggers a psychological reaction in Esther analogous to contamination. Budick

indicates that Esther's feminine environments "ought to have provided Esther with the language and identity" (or identifications) "she seeks. But each has abnegated authority... by allowing male language to infect and dominate female expression" (875). The intrusion of the male language via patriarchal presences, and the interruption of Esther's beloved white supremacist ideology by non-white characters drives Esther to an obsession with purity. Images of water, bathing, and spiritual hygiene emerge in the text whenever Esther's white female fragility is jeopardized. Esther believes herself contaminated after witnessing lurid sexuality between her friend Doreen and Lenny Shepherd. At the beginning of the night, Esther compares Doreen to a Black woman—"dusky as a bleached-blond Negress"—and herself to a "big smudgy-eyed Chinese woman" at the end of the night (Plath 18). The racializing of Doreen and her sexual engagement with a man leads to the first of Esther's racist purifying rituals. Esther draws a bath and reveals that "I never feel so much myself as when I'm in a hot bath," moving back towards freedom from what she perceives to be immoral sexuality and white purity (20). Although Esther maintains a rigid heterosexuality, Dorr's writings on the violent gender binary of the 1950s make it clear that sexual desire for men cannot be enacted safely—exemplified in Esther's rigorous attention to cleanliness following Doreen's interaction. Per Fuss's blurred lines of desire for/identification with, though Esther exclusively desires men, she cannot properly construct identifications with them without needing a bath at the least and weathering violence at the most.

The alternative, is of course, identification with women. Esther is pre-queered because of her unorthodox ideas about heterosexual ideology. But in the first half of the novel, she maintains a subscription to heterosexual desire—which cannot be fulfilled

safely. Lee Edelman, in *Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, reflects on queerness as dispossessing “the social order of the ground on which it rests: a faith in the consistent reality of the social” (6). Esther’s sexuality deals in the negatives of dominant discourse enough that it reads as queer, prior to and independent of any express desire for women. The question becomes whether or not Esther’s theoretically inscribed queerness can translate into viable identification with women. Esther’s identification practices only manifest on the other side of her sexual abuse and suicide attempts, in the space of the mental hospital. In the first section of the novel, Esther makes tries out identifications with other women, but usually falls short. In the case of the female Russian translator, Esther wishes to “crawl into her and spend the rest of my life barking out one idiom after another” (Plath 75). The desire to enter the Russian woman nears the consumption and incorporation of identification (per *Totem and Taboo*). But this identification reflects the negative of identity, Esther as the incorporated object, predicated on the “the alarming lure” of a quite Kristevan “empty speech” (Baldwin 66). Though Esther’s interest in the Russian woman is a desire directed towards a woman, it is a desire to disappear into the ideological other completely and therefore not an identification. Esther’s desire for her friend Doreen, another girl on the summer program in New York, is a different sort of animal—“Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my own bones” (Plath 7). This identification too is ontologically linked to a Kristevan conception of semiotic subjectivity. Doreen’s voice described as speaking from Esther’s own body represents the body-speech of the hysteric, and thus a “hysterical” identification. Doreen as well might occupy the queer space outside white feminine heterosexuality, for her perusal of Lenny. But instead, the identification is marred and broken by the heterosexual intrusion

of Lenny, with whom Doreen begins a normative relationship—“she spent most of her free time with Lenny Shepherd now” (25). Afterwards, Esther pledges her loyalty to Betsy, a sexually clean girl also on the summer program, who Esther believes she “resembled at heart” (22). But Betsy, like Doreen, is an insufficient double, who cannot facilitate meaningful identification in being so “easily categorized—stereotyped” (Wagner-Martin 65). Though surrounded by safe white women, Esther cannot identify with them. Queerness is interrupted by dominant heterosexual ideology, and white supremacy is threatened by the presence of non-white people, disallowing Esther from fully identifying with other women.

Which is why the sexual assault scene in Chapter Nine figures as the prompt for Esther’s descent into hysteria and suicidal urges. The ideology of present day understands the attack as a sexual assault. But 1950s ideology obscures this, for Esther is on a date with her attacker—a Latin American man named Marco. “Date Rape” as it is understood now, did not exist in 1953, nor even in 1963 when *The Bell Jar* was published. Though Dorr catalogues examples of date rape in *The Perils of the Back Seat*, she clarifies in the notes that “date rape or acquaintance rape were terms coined in the 1970s” and still remained relatively invisible, seen “as a ‘lesser’ crime either because the woman somehow ‘asked for it’ or because the associated trauma is presumed to be less because she knew her attacker” (43 n5). The assault Esther experiences is not even a true rape—it is the kind of attack that women *expected* to endure on dates at the time. In 1950s sexual ideology and dating culture, this sort of assault was normal: “Sociological studies made it frighteningly clear how frequent male aggression was and, indeed, how normal, accepted and silenced it remained” (34). On this basis, the assault is silenced first by the text and doubly by the

critics who fail to acknowledge it. Scholars often skirt around Esther's sexual assault, describing Marco's actions as an "attempt to rape" (Boyer 210). But at the same time, the violent language of the attack and Marco's specific designation as "Peruvian" signals what 1950s constructions of rape looked like:

Then he threw himself face down as if he would grind his body through me and into the mud. "It's happening," I thought. "It's happening. If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen." Marco set his teeth to the strap at my shoulder and tore my sheath to the waist. I saw the glimmer of bare skin, like a pale veil separating two bloody-minded adversaries. "Slut!" The word hissed by my ear. "Slut!" The dust cleared, and I had a full view of the battle. I began to writhe and bite... Then I fisted my fingers together and smashed them at his nose. It was like hitting the steel plate of a battleship. Marco sat up. I began to cry. (Plath 109)

Plath's characterization of the attack using words like "threw himself," "grind," "tore," "bloody-minded," and "battle" associate the scene with violent rape. Dorr outlines several rape cases from the 1950s in her article, noting that each incident survives because "they outline the extremes of male aggression, and because they resulted in conviction, no small feat at a time when women were blamed routinely for their inability to fend off aggressive men" (34). Both the scenario of the date and Esther's ability to effectively fend off her assailant silence this scene as a "non-rape" in terms of dominant fifties ideology. Neither Plath nor Esther have the appropriate language for the attack, and it sinks into the background. However, the violence and racial construction of the scene ontologically link the attack to a rape.

As does Esther's response. Although she remains a virgin, she is still physically damaged via her dress. The "glimmer of bare skin, like a pale veil" indicates a transgression of psychological and bodily integrity and drives Esther to fight back (Plath 109). Although Esther's action in the scene can be ideologically read as what she *should* do (per the 1950s), it can also be read per today as evidence that she would have suffered worse had she not

acted. Boyer has a similar claim, describing Esther's move to fight back as an attempt to create her story "in blood because language eludes her" (209). Boyer composes this moment as an instance of the bodily inscription onto which trauma can be read. To return to the 1950s, Marco's racial designation—"from Peru"—describes the "racialized narratives" of white women's victimhood in rape in Dorr's piece (Plath 103) (Dorr 28). Juxtaposed with Doreen's all-American date, "a tall boy in shirtsleeves and a blond crewcut," Marco is "also tall, but dark, with slightly longer hair" and has a "flickering smile" which reminds Esther of snake (Plath 104, 105, 106). Marco fits among the other non-white individuals in the territory of *The Bell Jar*. But unlike the Black orderly or the Russian translator, Marco is an "other" in the white American ideological paradigm of the 1950s who possesses an active status. Also, unlike the Black orderly or the Russian translator, this moment signifies Esther's usually unmarked race in the negative of Marco's. Boyer alleges that Marco wiping his spilled the blood onto a white handkerchief enacts Marco's marking of Esther's white body: "This blood that Marco sheds and writes indelibly upon a white background, is his text written upon an assaulted, nearly raped, woman" (209). After wiping his nose onto a handkerchief, he then wipes his blood onto Esther's cheek—fulfilling Esther's perceived racial tainting and performing a protracted sexual marking.

Marco exists only in this story as a construction of 1950s rape ideology, which relied on the victimhood of white women and the aggression of non-white men, most prototypically Black men. White men were supposed to be protectors of white women, and Black men the aggressors. According to Dorr, for a century prior to the 1950s, "white women had been warned of the dangers of black men" with a supposed lust for white flesh (28). Dorr describes the much-circulated discourse in the South of the "black beast rapist,

the mythical black man crazed to gratify his supposed lust for white women” (38). According to the tale, roving gangs of Black youths were “known” to snatch white women from their white dates back seats of cars and sexually brutalize them. These “cases” were “more likely to be reported and accepted by authorities because they confirmed assumptions held by many white southerners” (39). They were also more likely to be fabricated, and it became quite common for white couples caught “necking” to blame young Black men for sexually abusing the white women. As sexual-violence activist and lawyer G. Chezia Carraway puts it, prosecution of rape cases perpetrated by non-white men was most often as a “thinly veiled appeal for a public lynching” (1303). White men were, of course, a much larger threat in the close quarters of 1950s dating culture, and women of color are almost four times more likely than white women to be raped according to a 1987 study (1303). The number of instances of sexual violence against both women of color and white women in 1953, 1987, and in 2019 are much greater. Dorr’s cases of Black male rapists are also specific to African American and white relations in the 1950s, but that should by no means suggest that other men of color were not perceived to be predators.

As non-white as well as non-American, Marco stands outside of the white heterosexual ideology of the 1950s, representing a threat to American ideals. Noting this, a reader should approach an analysis of this scene with the assumption that Plath is likely to have adhered to an ideology of racialized rape in order to make the psychological impact of Esther’s assault evident. The scene produces a confluence of contradictory ideological meanings. All at the same time, it is standard date activity, “date rape,” not rape, and racially constructed abuse. The scene in itself is a hysteric one, which leads “the analyst through a thicket of confusing and shifting identifications” (Fuss 116). Reading this scene,

thus must rely on the identifications the both construct it and follow it. While Marco and Esther dance prior to the assault, they dance, and Marco leads, and Esther “seemed to be riveted to him” (Plath 107). This is emblematic of heterosexual desire: the consumption of the passive (woman) by the active (man). Marco’s dual activity as a man and passivity as an “other” is marked in this scene as a violent identification—one in which Esther is consumed and then quickly rejected. Marco attacks, retreats, then marks Esther with his own blood. Remaining is an ambivalent, hysterical identification—a simultaneous belief that the attack is deserved and desirous as well as violent. Unable to reconcile what she believes the attack to be—a nonevent, a narrow escape—with the trauma she feels, Esther turns to self-violent identification. Esther attempts to simultaneously destroy and incorporate an identification with Marco into her physical body.

Constructing this scene along the lines of what the twenty first century reader would understand to be sexual assault is critical in explaining Esther’s psychological response and descent into hysteria. Following the assault scene, Esther throws away all of her clothing and begins rejecting the cleanliness adopted in the first half of the novel. This begins Esther’s hysterical descent into ambivalent, violent identification. On the deserted roof of the Amazon Hotel, Esther tosses her wardrobe away: “Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one’s ashes, the gray scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York” (Plath 111). Wagner-Martin posits this is Esther’s rejection of femininity, of “the traditional image of the pretty, smart girl, object for man’s acquisition” (61). Baldwin renders it as a “rejection of consumer abundance” (62). Both are in part true. Replacing Esther’s sexual self is a traumatized one. In place of the “pretty, smart girl” with all the



tokens of Capital consumerist ideology—"...all those uncomfortable, expensive clothes... same size-seven patent leather shoes... skimpy imitation silver-lamé bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle..."—is a girl who feels alienated from her body (Plath 2).

Attractive advertising can no longer disguise the emptiness and trauma of Esther's confused identification with Marco. But beyond rejecting femininity or capitalism, Esther is performing the first murder of the heterosexual identification with Marco. Esther was not penetrated or physically harmed during her assault, but her dress was ripped to reveal her naked body in all its white female fragility. Esther's beautiful clothing and subscription to 1950s white feminine norms cannot protect her from the threat of heterosexuality. In a way the pale glimmer of her naked body functions as a semiotic signal, an imperative to act, revealing "the battle."

Rejecting the feminine sexuality of her skimpy dresses, Esther seeks to formulate identification with pure Betsy once more. In the morning, Esther boards the train home to Boston wearing Betsy's clothing. Henry Schevy points out Betsy's loaned clothing, "Having flung her clothes from the top of the hotel, she abandons her old self... for Betsy's home-spun blouse and dirndl skirt" (Schevy 28). In wearing Betsy's clean, demure clothing home, Esther attempts to re-identify with Betsy, who she had decided she most resembled. But, she leaves Marco's blood on her cheek: "I thought I would carry [the blood stains] around with me, like the relic of a dead lover" (Plath 112-113). Boyer claims Esther "wants to be noticed as one who has paid the price of sexual sisterhood—except that she is still a virgin" (210). Affixing meaning to her experience without being physically maimed, Esther keeps what Marco has "written" onto her, as a hysterical, semiotic, utterance of her trauma. This blood signifies the price that Esther has not managed to pay with the blood her own hymen.

Marco's blood also might represent a "primitive life fluid" that isn't semen, a failure to fully rape (210). The remaining stain is first a marking by Marco, and a marking by Esther who chooses not to wash it off. The mark both retains the perceived impurity of the racial and heterosexual per Esther's racist purity rituals and signifies physical proof that Esther has been violated. Describing the blood as "relic of a dead lover" reflects Esther's need to carry something, some evidence of her trauma. Leaving the blood marking on her cheek reveals that she no longer feels the white clean femininity she used to seek, that Betsy's clothing is a poor disguise and a failed identification. This scene is Esther's first attempt to murder and replace the ambivalent heterosexual identification with Marco.

From this point on, Esther begins to spiral. Continuing to wear Betsy's skirt and blouse, Esther refuses to wash and fails to sleep (Plath 127). Esther seeks to be consumed by the other, trying and failing to attach an identification to Betsy by wearing her clothing, similar to the case of the Russian translator. As her depression deepens, Esther finds she cannot read and cannot write—"The letters grew barbs and rams' horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way" (124). As symbolic speech fails her and the semiotic goes unheard in the male structured linguistic world, Esther presses further and further into complete silence. Her descent is brought to its climax by the faulty electroshock therapy at the hands of her psychiatrist Doctor Gordon, another domineering male figure. Like Marco, Doctor Gordon is a disjuncting figure "who confuses and mangles and veritably obliterates Esther's identity" (Budick 879). The electroshock therapy thus portrays a second rape. Esther describes the therapy in terms of assault: "Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world... I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (Plath 143). Esther's

language of self-blame signals a trauma response to the electroshock therapy. Anne Cluysenaar believes that Plath's writing bears the marking of "a typical survivor in the psychiatric sense" of having weathered "extreme vulnerability to danger" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 63-64). While Cluysenaar means Plath writes as a survivor of suicide, the same logic can be applied to Esther's response to the painful electroshock therapy in terms. It is language that correlates directly with Marco's attack and bears the marks of the blame she no doubt feels for suffering such an advance. The electroshock therapy can also be read as trauma response also because it figures immediately before Esther begins to consider and then act on suicidal urges.

The very next passage in the text outlines Esther's first interest in suicide. Telling her mother that she is "through with that Doctor Gordon," Esther attempts to divulge her pain through the semiotic speech of suicide. Each of Esther's five suicide attempts reference water: sea water, bath water, or womb water. The first time, Esther considers slitting her wrists in the bath: "I thought it would be easy, lying in the tub and seeing the redness flower from my wrists" (Plath 147). The second time, she visits the ocean she frequented as a child: "A wave drew back, like a hand, and then advanced and touched my foot... I waited, as if the sea could make my decision for me" (153). In the third, she thinks of her grandmother's house and boats: "I thought with longing of the house my grandmother had before she sold it... and overhead beams thick as a ship's timbers" (158). In the fourth, she attempts to drown herself in the sea: "The water pressed in on my eardrums and on my heart" (161). In the fifth, she sequesters herself in the womblike space of her mother's basement, where "A dim undersea light filtered through the slits of the cellar windows" (168). The images of water in each attempt signal the pre-symbolic space

of childhood, the semiotic. Literary critic Annis Pratt's analysis in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Literature* outlines the presence of natural imagery in healing from rape trauma. Pratt theorizes that in classical literature and mythmaking, men are "agents of harsh disruption" to the feminine space of nature, which signifies "freedom, solace, and protection" (Pratt 25). Pratt references women in Greek myths turning into laurel trees, reeds, or springs to escape rape (Pratt 25). Pratt also quotes Simone de Beauvoir, who believes young girls "devote a special love to Nature: still more than the adolescent boy, she worships it... it is her kingdom as a whole; when she takes possession of it, she also proudly takes possession of herself" (362). For the young girl, nature thus becomes a space of generative subjectivity. This is evidenced in one of Esther's few references to her childhood: "I felt happier than I had been since I was about nine and running along the hot white beaches with my father the summer before he died" (Plath 75). The ocean and water are sites of happiness and innocence for Esther.

Water also thus occupies the semiotic space of childhood through which Esther can inscribe her trauma. Attempting to drown herself at the beach, Esther's body speaks back to her, asserting its own existence, "As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears. I am I am I am" (Plath 158). This insistence of the semiotic signals that Esther must both move through death back to childhood semiotics, in order to re-learn the symbolic and form proper identifications to replace the traumatic one with Marco. Like identification in *Totem and Taboo*, Esther's suicide attempts are simultaneously destructive and constructive of latent heterosexual identification with Marco—whom she desires and despises at the same time. The multiplicity of the attempts aligns with the repeated elegy of identification—"Identification is itself an act of serial killing" (Fuss 93). Each suicide

attempt, though failing to result in death, enacts a *murder of the ambivalent identification* in its conjuring of Esther's semiotic subjectivity. Generative of subjectivity through nature and as semiotic speech, Esther's suicide attempts thus move towards rebirth as well as death.

The "success" of Esther's last suicide attempt in returning her to life is predicated upon the two scenes just prior to it. First, Esther delivers flowers to a maternity ward while volunteering at a local hospital. Esther notices "that a lot of flowers were droopy and brown at the edges" and begins to pick out the dead ones, thinking that "it would be discouraging for a woman who'd just had a baby to see somebody plonk down a big bouquet of dead flowers in front of her" (Plath 162). Presented with women marked by (supposedly consensual) sex, Esther rejects the wilted flowers as she rejects her own tainted body. When the women object to the rearrangement of their flowers, Esther runs from the hospital, directly (it seems), to the graveyard where her father is buried—stopping only for new flowers. At her father's grave, she sinks to the ground begins to cry: "I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain" (167). "Salt" is an unusual adjective for rain, it is a reference to tears, to the sea of Esther's childhood, and thus to her previous suicide attempts. Perhaps this is the same sort of rain that doesn't wash you clean (41). Henry Schevy makes the same connection: "water is also associated with her father because of childhood memories" (33). However, his reading of this scene relies on intertextuality and a Freudian perspective. Citing Plath's poem "Daddy" (1965), Schevy implies that Esther sexually desires her father, wishing "to entomb herself alive" and join him in death (34). To push back against this reductively Oedipal analysis, one might consider that Esther desires not her father but the feeling of being a child again. Reading Esther's howling as a verbalization allows for a reading like this to move away

from the Oedipal and towards the identificatory, the semiotic. Esther has been unable to express her suffering until this moment—"I can't sleep, I can't read" (Plath 126). She discusses symptoms but cannot explain her pain or the trauma that has caused it. Linguistics theorist Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain*, asserts that, "Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures that unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). Pain is un-sharable through the dominant discourse of the human symbol system. It *is* sharable through the semiotic speech of the body, which asserts itself through the childlike wailing of Esther at her father's grave. Esther hasn't felt happy since before her father died and her family moved away from the ocean (Plath 150). Faced again with her father, moving through suicides which generate attachment to water, Esther reverts to the semiotic and manages to speak for the first time. This acknowledgement thus permits Esther's rebirth into a space of female identification—moving away from the male, the Oedipal, the heterosexual.

The location of Esther's final suicide attempt presents ample evidence for a move towards the feminine. Taking sleeping pills, Esther sequesters herself in the small earthy crawlspace in the basement of her mother's house lit by a "dim undersea light" and sinks into a watery sleep: "The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep" (Plath 169). The "undersea light" of the basement and the "sweeping tide" which brings her into "sleep," are all emblematic of womb water. This characterization substantiates a reading of Esther's final suicide attempt as a backwards movement toward the semiotic, which Kristeva considers "a feminine and maternally structured space" which "pre-dates the imposition of the (oedipal) sexual identity" (Grosz

160). If pre-death is marked by Esther's infantile wailing at her father's grave like the newborn crying in its father's arms, Esther's "death" is the insemination and birth into the mental hospital. She first performs her own burial/conception in her mother's womb/basement, which E. Miller Budick considers "the ultimately fatal female retreat" (877). Then, in her watery sleep she moves through the birth canal of the crawlspace and emerges on the other end into the semiotic order of the hospital. This backwards birth completes the destruction and integration of Esther's identification with Marco, in delivering Esther through vocalization of pain, rejection of the masculine symbolic language, and into healing. As Schevy points out, Esther's death drive is "not only a wish to die but a wish to be unborn," and that "she is very much in an analogous situation to a newborn child in that she too lacks an identity" (32). On the opposite side she will begin her official developmental plot in the feminine space of the private hospital. As a space comprised of only white women, the hospital operates by different rules. Esther is not only able to take her first steps into the symbolic, but also properly into the queer. Esther's suicide/birth paves the way for new identifications with female characters, female spaces, and female desire that will both allow for acknowledgement of her trauma and also replace it.

Esther enters into the new world of her post-suicide attempt life incredulous of others, but with a newfound boldness. In the city hospital, Esther's association of men with violence and deceit pushes through to the surface, "Some of them looked so young I knew they couldn't be proper doctors" (Plath 179). Female healing obviously cannot be facilitated in a male dominated space, but at least Esther can now verbalize this and seek to leave it. Additionally, the city hospital is inhabited by people of other races. This is where

the Black orderly appears, the only character who sees Esther for what she truly is, a “Miss Mucky-Muck” (181). Ideologically his presence in the text is an intrusion. Kate Baldwin compares this to Richard Nixon’s empty declaration of “diversity as equal to the abundance of choice,” as actual diversity “would require opening selfhood to difference” (72-73). Esther’s white supremacy prohibits such an opening. The exchange thus reveals Esther as not only picky, but also unreservedly racist. Esther’s entry into the symbolic permits a full rejection of men and heterosexual ideology, but it also facilitates Esther’s racism. Having been re-birthered, Esther is now able to take the “raw material’ of signification, the corporeal, libidinal matter” of the semiotic, and harness it “for social cohesion and regulation” (Grosz 151). Esther has re-connected with the semiotic, allowing a newfound ability to vocalize feelings and needs for the better of her identification but the worse of her racial tolerance. Esther begs her mother to help her “get out of here... You got me in here... You get me out” (Plath 179). To Esther’s surprise, her mother agrees and delivers, proving the power of her words and effective power of mirroring. Mrs. Greenwood enlists the help of Philomena Guinea (the wealthy woman responsible for Esther’s scholarship to Smith), who funds Esther’s transfer to a private hospital free of male doctors, elderly patients, and minority orderlies. This signals the upward mobility of a white woman attuned to symbolic language and dominant discourse, allowing Esther to mitigate her own healing by speaking the right language.

In the private hospital, Esther finally enters the space of enclosed white femininity where queer identifications can flourish. Nicholas Donofrio asserts that Esther’s private hospital “appears very much like a women’s college” with its (white) “genteel names” and residents who “roam the grounds, visit each other’s rooms, and read and talk about the



latest issues of *Vogue*" (238). The comparison is apt, for women's colleges both promote the empowerment and confidence of their students and also tend to accrue rumors of "lesbianism" occurring within their walls. Esther's new female psychiatrist, Doctor Nolan, operates as both a teacher and maternal mirroring entity. Emboldened by the positive results from speaking up to her mother, Esther describes the electric shock therapy she received from a male doctor before her suicide attempts began, "No, I didn't like him at all... I didn't like what he did to me.' 'Did to you?' I told Doctor Nolan about the machine, and the blue flashes, and the jolting and the noise..." (Plath 189). This conversation reads as Esther's first verbal admission of disliking her assault. But it is still from a distance, because while Esther has language for the pain of the electroshock therapy, she still does not possess the term "date rape" or "sexual assault." Still, the mere ability merely to disclose this dislike reflects Esther's movement away from desiring heterosexuality. Doctor Nolan assures Esther "That was a mistake,' she said then. 'It's not supposed to be like that" and that her new electroshock treatments will be "like going to sleep," drawing a connection to Esther's womb suicide (189). An identification with Doctor Nolan quickly replaces the latent one with male harm-doers. E. Miller Budick argues that when Esther receives electroshock therapy at the private hospital, Doctor Nolan "confirms Esther's identity and reestablishes her sense of self. She names Esther, repeating her name three times, and speaks directly to her" (880). Esther's identification with Doctor Nolan is more maternal than desirous, but it mitigates the more sexually based female identifications in the clean, feminine, and overwhelmingly white private hospital. It is Doctor Nolan who signs off on Esther's diaphragm and suggests the possible nurturance of female identifications: "I don't see what women see in other women," Esther asks, "What does a woman see in a woman

that she can't see in a man?" (Plath 219). Doctor Nolan replies only, "Tenderness" (219).

Esther ultimately finds the greatest identification with Joan Giling, another white girl at the private hospital—but one who Esther knew from before her hysteria. Joan grew up in the same town as Esther, attended the same women's college, and also dated Buddy Willard. Notably, Joan presents a viable double for Esther *because* she is not so much an 'other' as a 'self', sharing so many of the same social positions of Esther (white, wealthy, *clean*). Sylvia Plath wrote her own thesis at Smith on the presence of the double in literature. Linda Wagner-Martin describes Plath's discovery of the "psychological necessity" of an 'other,' for the purpose of "recognizing within another the very traits one might not want to recognize under self-scrutiny" (63). Which is why the presence of Joan is so interesting, for not only does she mirror many of Esther's identifying attributes, but she is also attracted to women (Plath 218). Joan thus opens up the space for an identification, in a way that Esther's previously depicted friendships with other women could not. The triangulation of Esther, Joan, and Buddy and would be ample enough evidence for a queer reading even if Joan did not engage in sex with women. Buddy represents a crux between the two women, the heterosexual object onto which Esther and Joan can affix queer desires for one another. Eve Sedgwick discusses René Girard's theory of homosexual triangulation, which renders "the bond between two rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved" (708). In a story in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) a triangle of desire figures in the context of a supper party, in which a butcher desires his wife's friend. Freud reads the butcher's wife as "a feminine-identified heterosexual" who is only jealous of her husband's desire (Fuss 31). Theorists such as Catherine Clément and

Cynthia Chase have re-figured the story in different ways, but Fuss chooses to reimagine it as one “of ‘between women,’ with the butcher, at most, a convenient identificatory relay for a socially prohibited lesbian desire” (31). To read the triangle of Buddy, Joan, and Esther in this way means a re-working of a classic Freudian reading of the jealous woman.

Joan first appears earlier in the text as the vehicle which delivers Buddy to Esther when he stops by her dorm on the way to “the Sophomore Prom with Joan” (Plath 58). But once Joan appears in the private hospital, Buddy fades away and a more nuanced connection emerges between the women. Esther remarks that although she abhors Joan’s homosexuality, she is fascinated with her. For Barbara Johnson, queerness between women has more to do with “protracted an intense eye contact and involuntary re-encounters ungrounded in conscious positive feelings” (162). This certainly holds with Joan. Esther wonders if Joan, with her “pale, pebble eyes” would “continue to pop in at every crisis of my life to remind me of what I had been through” (Plath 219). The text also figures Joan as a distorted mirror, in which Esther can simultaneously recognize their differences and similarities. It is in part what unconsciously draws Esther to Joan, “her thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own” (219). Which is perhaps is what makes Esther’s confusion about “what women see in other women” so humorous—for in Joan she sees herself.

Esther’s queer identification with Joan at the private hospital also permits the protracted fulfillment of Marco’s failed rape. Securing a diaphragm through shopping privileges, Dowbnia reads Esther as free “from an unwanted relegation to the domestic sphere,” now able to complete her de-flowering (586). The unusualness of these decisions,

or their inherent queerness, should not go unnoticed. The cultural ideology of 1953 still primarily viewed women as mothers, on the basis of what Nathan Stormer describes as an “enduring pro-natal orthodoxy regarding maternity as woman’s telos” (346). In a proposition at a secret Planned Parenthood conference on abortion in 1955, psychiatrist and executive secretary of medical information at the New York Academy of Medicine Iago Galdston “declared, ‘A woman is a uterus surrounded by a supporting organism’” (qtd. in Stormer 346). Esther obviously disagrees, choosing instead to free herself from the threat of pregnancy with birth control. The decision, aided by Doctor Nolan and the queer space of the private hospital, places her external to dominant heterosexual ideology of the 1950s. Esther uses the birth control to finally rid herself of her virginity by sleeping with a man named Irwin by her own agency. Notably, Irwin is white. The intercourse itself is heterosexual but fulfills a more symbolic than desirous purpose. Esther bleeds from the penetration, but finally feels whole, “I couldn’t possibly be a virgin anymore... I felt part of a great tradition” (Plath 229). This sexual encounter is the long-protracted fulfillment of the rape and marking Esther was searching for following her experience with Marco. Marilyn Boyer constitutes this bleeding as productive of “a body of writing” through the semiotic language of her body (220). The “writing” produced by Esther’s hemorrhaging tells the rape narrative that her body could not when she was initially assaulted. The injury is, after all, described as “one in a million” by the male doctor who treats Esther (233). Though sex with Irwin is literally heterosexual, it remains queer through Esther’s use of it to write her own narrative.

This sexual experience is also queer in that it also leads Esther to back to Joan again, who has since been released from the hospital and now lives in Boston. Esther arrives at

Joan's new apartment uncontrollably bleeding, expecting Joan to admonish her for her extra-marital sex. Instead, Joan retrieves towels and takes care of Esther with that queer "tenderness," and Esther realizes that Irwin and the bleeding are just "a mere prick to her pleasure at my arrival" (Plath 231). Like Buddy, Irwin is only a heterosexual vehicle (mandated by 1950s ideology) required for Joan and Esther's queer interaction. The scene is by three counts significant: it is a protracted fulfillment of Esther's rape, an extremely physical interaction between the two women, and an *effort to preserve life* rather than to end it. Linda Wagner-Martin alleges that by "giving Joan the problem of saving her life" Esther completes identification with Joan, who "rather than being a copy of Esther, now finds herself an original, the friend responsible for Esther's very life" (69). Both women bear the burden of Esther's life and body as if belong to the both of them. In the emergency room as the male doctor begins to "probe" Esther's vagina, Joan stands by "rigid as a soldier, at my side, holding my hand, for my sake or hers I couldn't tell" (233). Joan's steadfastness in the hospital is significant as this sequence runs parallel to the assault scene in New York. When after Marco's attack Doreen disappeared from the country club leaving Esther to slink home covering her "shoulders and bare breasts," Joan remains through the entire ordeal as Esther weathers the pain and embarrassment and a male doctor handles her body (110). Through Joan's tender physical attention, queerness literally heals the violence of heterosexuality, reinforcing affection and identification between the two women. Both Esther and Joan have a stake in the other, contradicting "the sensationalized elements of lesbianism" by exemplifying that tenderness in "a novel, and world, in which so few examples of that quality exist" (Wagner-Martin 68). The relationship stands outside of 1950s heterosexual ideology, wherein women are pitted

against one another in competition for men. Joan who loves women and wants to be a psychologist and Esther who pursues casual sex with men and wants to be a writer, stand outside the 1950s “the marriage-and-family machine” (Donofrio 221). As queer entities in a heterosexual society, their identification promotes the development of both who might be stunted alone.

Which is perhaps why it *isn't* so shocking when Joan kills herself, just shortly after the hemorrhaging episode. The text places the scene in the emergency room and Joan's death in close quarters which inevitably “suggests a cause-and-effect relationship” (Wagner-Martin 69). Esther gravitates towards that suspicion immediately, but Doctor Nolan pushes her away from. Doctor Nolan is correct. Joan's suicide should be read as the only viable means to which a queer relationship can be taken in a text set in 1953 and bound by the ideologies of the time. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Lee Edelman argues that “queerness exposes sexuality's inevitable coloration by the [death] drive” through its “rejection of spiritualization through marriage to reproductive futurism” (27). If heteronormativity is fixed upon the issue of reproduction, and homosexuality is its inverse, locating queerness in the gaps, the endings, and the failure of the marriage plot. As having sex with Irwin finally completed Esther's losing her virginity, Joan's suicide indicates a completion or fulfillment of Esther's suicide. Joan takes her own life “in the woods, by the frozen pond” (Plath 235). The locale is no accident, spectacularly mirroring Esther's suicidal movement towards nature. It also brings the return of Buddy, who seeks to sneak himself back into the long-vanished triangle of desire. When he and Esther meet again, she braces for lingering desire or emotion and instead feels “Nothing but a great, amiable boredom” (238). Now that Buddy is excluded from the triangulation, Esther

escapes the heterosexual complex of the fifties. Buddy asks Esther, “Do you think there’s something in me that *drives* women crazy?” to which Esther laughs and responds, “You had nothing to do with us, Buddy” (239-240). The marked use of “us” effectively cuts the heterosexual out of the equation once and for all. Budick posits Joan’s death as Plath “sealing off the lesbian option” and Esther wedding herself to the masculine world (883). Perhaps Joan’s suicide closes off the potential for embodied lesbian sexuality, but it opens up the space for the queer to flow into Esther’s development, set going by the queer climax of death. Where Esther has previously approached desire for other women in terms of being the one consumed (the Russian woman translator, Doreen’s bones, her mother’s basement), this identification is a parallel exchange.

At the end of the novel, Esther prepares for her own release from the hospital and she attends Joan’s funeral. Esther watches Joan’s casket being lowered into the earth and reflects on the past six months—“I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco’s diamond...” (Plath 237). Not only does she remember, but she resists forgetting, citing the experiences as “part of me. They were my landscape” (237). Esther has incorporated her traumas and experiences into a new subjectivity, new landscape, new self, through the natural world which she returned to through her suicides. This imagery is particularly potent as she watches her double’s entombment. Esther wonders, “what I thought I was burying” (242). Overtly, Esther is burying herself by burying her other, engaged Fuss’s assertion that “All active identifications, including positive ones, are monstrous assassinations: the Other is murdered and... incorporated before being entombed inside the subject” (Fuss 34). As Joan mitigated Esther’s protracted sexual marking, as does Joan mitigate Esther’s “*repetition and remembrance*” of

identification (34). As a fulfillment of a queer narrative and identification in the context of the 1950s, Joan's burial represents the final consummation/consumption of identification. In the site of the graveyard, now confronted with her double rather than the father, Esther's body once again speaks the language of the semiotic. Esther reflects on the flowers by the grave, the lawns covered in pure white snow, and turns inward towards her body, towards herself: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (Plath 243).



## Chapter II: Queer Inversions, Black Hollows in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

*"In many ways the Freudian paradigm implicitly depends on the presence of the black female other. One of its more problematic aspects is that in doing so it relegates black women's sexuality to the irreducibly abnormal category in which there are no distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual women."*

Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality"

*Sula* doubly depicts the displaced and de-centered *bildungsroman* along the axis of race and gender. Literary critic and Morrison scholar, Pin-chia Feng warns that reading Toni Morrison's works as *bildungsroman* poses an "inherent risk" of allocating socially and politically specific texts to a "quintessential western bourgeois (male) genre" (40). Not only do the race and gender positions of *Sula*'s characters problematize its genre, but as well its double protagonists do as well. *Sula* follows the development of two young Black women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. The literary double is an oft implemented trope, but also one of "psychological necessity" in novels of development according to Linda Wagner-Martin (62). *Sula* is not a story about two characters' parallel developments, but a developmental plot with two subjects: a "double *bildungsroman*" according to Feng. Nel and Sula grow in terms of one another, inhabiting a dual selfhood integral to the subjective selves of each. *Sula* is not the first novel to depict the double in a coming of age tale. But it is also not the first novel about young Black women to depict the double. It is nonetheless a potent example of a de-centered *bildungsroman* plotted along the lines of identification. Nel and Sula's doubling integrates and expands upon what Plath concluded in her undergraduate English thesis on Fyodor Dostoevsky: "recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration" (qtd. in Wagner-Martin 63). As young Black

women, Nel and Sula's interdependent identification and doubling is more theoretically provocative than that of Dostoevsky's protagonists because of the significant trouble of being a Black woman in the context of white American cultural ideology.

Identification is more critical, more fluidly examined, and more meaningful for the two young Black protagonists of *Sula*. Diana Fuss, white woman, deals predominantly with white narratives. But in the final chapter of *Identification Papers*, Fuss addresses the colonial history of identification, drawing heavily from work by Caribbean psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon. Her identification theory relies on Sigmund Freud's conception of self/other, a dichotomy which places Blackness inverse to whiteness. Fuss asserts that "colonialism may inflict its greatest physical violence precisely by attempting to exclude blacks from the very self-other dynamic that makes subjectivity possible" (142). The colonized are required to maintain a position as a non-white *as well as* assimilate to a white, European cultural norms at the same time. The Black subject in America is always already other, stuck in a deadlock of "difference and similitude," situated "at the vanishing point of subjectivity" (146). Therefore, identification becomes paramount in constructing selfhood for Nel and Sula. Scholar of Black feminist theory, Barbara Smith, reads the bonding of Nel and Sula is an example of Black women's bonding which has "always" taken place "for the sake of barest survival" (139). Smith is the first to argue for the application of a specific lens of critical theory and ideology to the writing of Black women. Smith believes that both sexual and nonsexual relationships between women constitute a valuable aspect of Black women's literature (137). Finding solace in another who faces the same racial and gender oppression is critical for the young Black female protagonist. When they first meet as children, Nel and Sula have already discovered their othering: "they were neither white

nor male" (*Sula* 52). To combat this, they "set about creating something else to be" through identification with one another (52).

In Black women's vernacular, the term *girlfriend* can refer to any close woman friend or confidante whether platonic and sexual. The term is thus quite apt here for its encompassment of a variety of female relationships. Kevin Everod Quashie indicates that "the girlfriend is someone who makes it possible for a Black woman to bring all of herself into consideration, to imagine herself wild and adventurous, but also safely and of the shore" (190). The Black girlfriend (or playmate, sister, cousin) is *she who understands* in sharing the same experience of oppression, the same axis of identity. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, in "Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality," references the term "*mati*" in the Surinamese language, which colloquially means "same-sex lover" but etymologically comes from "the term 'shipmate,' as in 's/he who survived the middle passage with me'" (175). One thinks of Zadie Smith's characterization of adolescence as its own "middle passage" in *Swing Time* (2016) (214). The girlfriend is a critical feature of Black women's writing and Black feminist theory. Deborah E. McDowell indicates that because "white women, white men, and Black men consider their experiences as normative," Black women writers have been forced to make their own spaces in order to build subjectivity (168). The Black girlfriend might be read as the very embodiment of Black feminist theory, a necessary relationship in defining oneself outside of what is considered "normative" by white supremacy and through sexism. Quashie maintains their relationship creates the space for "a kind of 'selfishness,'" in opposition to "the social imperative for Black women to be selfless," which allows for the fostering of their individual subjectivities (188). In essence, friendship between Black women opens up a space for identifications specific to

lived experience.

Some critics are content to read *Sula* in terms of platonic friendship. White lesbian critic Barbara Johnson, referring somewhat facetiously to her “inner lesbo-meter,” feels *Sula* “does not work” as a queer text for “while the relationship is certainly overinvested, it is also abundantly explained” (162). For Johnson, the grounding of Nel and Sula’s need for one another bars eroticism. Deborah McDowell also shies from a queer reading of the text, believing a lesbian perspective on *Sula* is reductive of the novel’s “skillful blend of folklore, omens, and dreams, its metaphorical and symbolic richness” (170). Alternately, critics such as Kevin Everod Quashie (“The Other Dancer as Self: Girlfriend Selfhood”), Kathryn Stockton (“Heaven’s Bottom: Anal Economics”), and famously Barbara Smith (“Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”), maintain that Nel and Sula’s relationship is an inherently queer one. Still others, such as that of Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek, skirt the issue entirely, directing the reader to the aforementioned Barbara Smith for “an interpretation of *Sula* as a lesbian novel” (41-42). It is the position of this thesis to agree with the second group. Although Sula and Nel’s relationship may not be explicitly homosexual, their intense spiritual valences and resistance to heterosexual norms positions them as queer. Evelyn Hammonds contends that because Black female queerness has been “doubly silenced,” it must be located in the gaps in the text (129). Queerness pokes its head up in criticism of the heterosexual or bolstering of female relationships. Morrison’s consistently cynical portraits of heterosexual unions and emphasis on Nel and Sula’s relationship place *Sula* into the theoretical space of the queer.

Queerness is also a necessary component of the self/other identification exchange. Much of Fuss’s re-interpretation interrogates Freud’s claim that “desire for one sex is

always secure through identification with the other sex,” mandating heterosexuality in order to keep the two terms separate (11). A rigid gender binary thus forms the theoretical “lynchpin” between Freud’s homosocial and homosexual behaviors. By Freud’s contention, confusion of identification with desire results in homosexual desire. Freud prescribes his female patient in “Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality,” with the confused identification outlined by Fuss as: “wanting to *be* a mother” vs. “wanting to *have* a mother” (62). Freud still portrays desire for the mother in heterosexual terms as a latent Oedipal desire for the father. But surprisingly, Freud also determines that this study indicates a “considerable measure of latent or unconscious homosexuality” in all “normal people” (qtd. in Fuss 62). This conclusion contradicts Freud’s usual theory and concedes that homosexuality may be more linked to identification than he reports. Fuss enters the text at this strange concession to detail her belief that the psychological experience of identification and desire “cannot be securely separated or easily prevented from turning back on one another” (77). In other words, Fuss believes that all identifications are inherently desirous. Therefore, interpreting *Sula* through the lens of identification rests on reading Nel and Sula as queer characters.

Queering Nel and Sula also supports rendering identification within and de-centering the trajectory of Nel and Sula’s dual development. Reading their relationship as queer also has theoretical use in untangling the fraught territory of Black women’s sexuality. As Kyle Wazana Tompkins reveals “to be black” in the context of American history of chattel slavery, is “to be always already sexualized... and therefore to be always and already deviant” (174). This designation victimizes all Black Americans, but in particular it hinders the sexual agency of Black women through hegemonic objectification.

Evelynn Hammonds, scientist and scholar of African American feminism, discusses how white American ideology has always “already colonized” Black women’s bodies; a body which “has so much sexual potential that it has none at all” (129). Ideology perceives the Black American woman’s body as the “embodiment of sex,” silencing her individual sexual agency (129). Hammonds calls for a more holistic engagement of Black feminist sexuality, foregrounding the positive and pleasurable, and locating queerness for Black women as a site “where black female desire is expressed” (132). Queerness thus constructs a space of discursive sexuality free from sexism and white supremacy. Critics often view Nel and Sula as opposites and *Sula* as a text about women’s differences. Marie Nigro characterizes Sula as “the impulsive, emotional one” and Nel as frigid: “the practical one” (727). Similarly, Pinchia Feng remarks that “Nel regards herself as a ‘good’ black woman since she abides faithfully by the values of her community. Sula, on the other hand, resists conformity and questions this arbitrary division” (79). It is tempting to read figures of the double through Angel/Devil, Virgin/Whore dichotomies. But there is little nuance to categorically difference Sula and Nel. A queer reading assuages this tension by pairing Nel and Sula together as two interdependent agents who borrow and reject pieces of one another.

Queerness in *Sula* is established via the erotic natural imagery of the Bottom. Nel and Sula meet in dreams before ever connecting in the real world. Isolated only daughters of absent fathers and distant mothers, both imagined “a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream” (*Sula* 51). Both girls hope for an erotic “someone” to confide in. Nel dreams of a “fiery prince,” Sula images herself “on a gray-and-white horse” (51, 52). Each wish for someone who will fill the empty spaces of her lonely childhood. Lorraine Bethel reads an inherent “sensuality in their interactions” (qtd. in B.

Smith 139). Morrison's dewy language encourages eroticism and situates Nel and Sula's "wish" for the other as closer to desire. Nel and Sula's meetings all take place in a summertime "limp with the weight of blossomed things" (*Sula* 56). In the summer of 1922, they discover adolescent heterosexuality together—"the summer of the beautiful black boys" (56). On "the second Saturday in June" in 1927, Nel gets married and Sula leaves the Bottom for ten years (84). When Sula returns to Medallion as an adult in 1937, Nel describes the particular "sheen" of the spring, "a glimmering as of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights... of lemon-yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils" (94). Annis Pratt, in *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* believes that nature figures prominently in the development of the young female-protagonist: "Visions of her own world within the natural world, or naturistic epiphanies, channel the young girl's protests into a fantasy where her imprisoned energies can be released" (17). Nature and summer are integral characteristics of Nel and Sula's identification. The natural returns when they reunite in adulthood, signaling that despite the ten years of absence, their identification persists. Pratt also specifies the eroticism of nature, identifying the figure of Eros or the "green-world lover" who inhabits the childhood realm of the natural (16). For Nel and Sula, this is an apt characterization. But Pratt's work is outdated and insufficient in that she fails to include any significant attention to race in her work.

Vashti Crutcher Lewis, in "African Tradition in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," reads *Sula* in terms of West African river worship. Lewis's interpretation provides a race specific reading of nature to satisfy the shortcomings of Pratt's text. She proposes that in bearing ontological connections to local madman and pariah, Shadrack, Sula maintains a "spiritual presence in nature" as the figure of an African river goddess (95). Shadrack is a shell-

shocked veteran of WWI who makes his living as a fisherman by the river. Lewis makes several comparisons which link Shadrack to a nature-based African spirituality. West African river spirits “are said to look like men but their feet and hands are different” (93). When Shadrack appears at the beginning of the text, he has difficulty controlling his hands, which “grow in a higgledy-piggledy fashion” and shrink down again (*Sula* 9). They are only calmed when he finds his reflection and his “grave black face” in the water of a toilet bowl (13). Not only does this scene reinforce Shadrack’s connection to water, but it introduces mirroring and comfort in Blackness as integral to identification in the text. Sula and Shadrack’s connection manifests during a scene at the river. Nel and Sula play digging holes with a fervor akin to orgasm, “they stroked the blades up and down... she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth... together they worked until the two holes were one and the same” (*Sula* 58). Replicating each other’s the movements, Nel and Sula penetrate the earth individually but in tandem with one another, until their holes are one and the same. This ecstatic mirroring expresses both identification and queer desire. Ronnie Scharfman’s colloquial outline of Lacanian theory details that the structure of mirroring is based upon “the ‘*regard*,’ and its analogues, such as echo, reflection, or dream” (90). “Regard” is what makes existence conceivable, for an “other” to mirror the movements of the “self” is to prove that the “self” is moving in the first place—and therefore exists. Kevin Everod Quashie reads the scene as a “surrender to the girlfriend: a meeting of one’s (other) self at the river” (193). Nel and Sula meet one another *as* the self, melding their holes together.

Following the digging play, Nel and Sula begin to play with another, younger child named Chicken Little. Sula swings him around by the arms, until he “slipped from her



hands and sailed away over the water” sinking underneath the surface of the river as Nel watches (*Sula* 60). Frozen with fear, both girls notice that Shadrack has been watching. Sula rushes over to his shack, where Shadrack consoles Sula with just the word “always,” the answer to “a question she had not asked” (63). Eighteen years later on Sula’s deathbed, the prophecy is fulfilled as she dreams of water and wonders, “Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always?” (149). The structuring of the death of Chicken Little alongside the first meeting of Sula and Shadrack, and this prophetic sleep of water, further outlines the West African religious valences of Vashti Crutcher Lewis’s argument. Lewis reads Chicken Little’s drowning a sacrifice: “it was not uncommon for children to be sacrificed to the river gods in Africa, throughout the Bight of Benin” (93). Sula and Shadrack’s meeting immediately following his death further construct the scene as a sacrificial one. It is the moment that Shadrack acknowledges Sula as a fellow water spirit, with whom he has a “spiritual marriage and kinship,” reminding her that she too will face a death by water (93). The characterization of Chicken Little’s death as a spiritual sacrifice grounded in nature, contributing to a queer reading of the scene. For although Lewis’s reading structures itself around Sula and Shadrack, Nel is also an agent in Chicken Little’s death. Chicken Little’s interruption of Nel and Sula’s mirrored, erotic digging leads to his murder: “an unspeakable restlessness and agitation held them. At the same instant each girl heard footsteps in the grass” (59). Chicken Little serves as a heterosexual intruder, portending the maternal roles that lie in wait for the girls if they veer from a queer path. In “Dead Boys and Adolescent Girls,” Pamela Thurschwell quotes Lisa Williams, who believes that that Chicken Little’s death buries “the encroaching adult emphasis on heterosexual relations as opposed to female friendship” (121). In retaliation, Nel and Sula ritually sacrifice Chicken Little to the

river.

The queer space of the Bottom also mitigates Nel and Sula's identification. The town rests on the premise of inversion. White farmers tricked the original inhabitants of the Bottom into settling the less fertile hilltop by calling it "the bottom of heaven," prompting the townspeople to nickname the community "the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills" (*Sula* 4). The Bottom, more neighborhood than town, is a haven of Blackness, where Black assumes the unmarked category and the white gaze is geographically inverted: "every day they could literally look down on the white folks" who lived in the valley (5). The Bottom's downward mobility as a Black working class community also incites a gender inversion. Kathryn Bond Stockton, in her text "Heaven's Bottom: Anal Economics and the Critical Debasement of Freud in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," reads the Bottom in a position of anality based on the incompatibility of American capitalism with its Black "Bottom" class. Stockton theorizes that the white American capitalist state's preclusion of Black men from prototypically male employment engenders emasculation as well as the regressive economics of the Bottom. Black men are passed over for manual labor and emasculated by service jobs, like Nel's eventual husband Jude Green—"a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman"—Black women have always been able to find work (*Sula* 82). The Black men of the Bottom (and throughout America) are denied access to white male masculinity through labor. In contrast, white economics afford Black women plentiful employment opportunities in domestic labor. Unlike the privatized domestic duties of the average mid-century white woman, Black women "have been blocked from (the bourgeois ideal of) white feminine passivity" and consistently "tied to production circuits in dominant economies" (Stockton 95). Black women are denied access to constructions of white female

femininity. Stockton contends that through this reversal, “Morrison’s black women become the anal penetrators of the novel’s black men” (88). Characterizing women as penetrating men is strikingly queer against the ideology of white, heterosexist society. The Bottom thus becomes an upside down, queer space. The domestic spaces of the Bottom are female-headed, positioning Black women on “top” in the anal metaphor of Stockton. The power structures of white gender fail in Black communities; excluding Black men and women from the heterosexual narrative of white ideology and constructing the Bottom as queer.

The Bottom represents, with devastating precision, how Black families “fail” to fit into the American capitalist paradigm of heterosexual family structure. Many ethnographic studies, such as the 1965 Moynihan Report, have presented the idea that “strong black women make black men weak,” blaming Black women for oppressing their men and Black men for *not* oppressing their women (Stockton 97). A Black household headed by a woman is seen as feminizing, debasing, and “proof” of a failure to be upwardly mobile. But Black masculinity in Morrison’s novels says something different, portraying Black men as “bodies who wear (in the sense of genital *as* clothes) the failed promise of a dominant sign” (98). Promised the gender supremacy of being male but denied that position because of their race, Black men are let down over and over again by white heterosexual ideals. Promised gainful, non-debasing employment by American culture and given nothing, Black masculinity looks like femininity because it is set up to fail. Black men as well as Black women become queered in the absence of their promised gender destinies—composing the Bottom as queer space. Morrison posits the Bottom as an “alternate, anal economy,” outside of the “white capitalist complex,” where the downwardly mobile, the queer, fixation on the anal, seems to be the key to identification (85). The citizens of the Bottom are

required to fit into a white American standard of masculinity and femininity by a white capitalist economy but barred from entry by the same ideology. The Bottom becomes a queer space, outside of the white, heterosexual nation-state which Tompkins believes to both produce and obscure “populations of color as always and already non-heteronormative and sexually deviant” (177). Dominant ideology will always perceive the incompatibility of Black men and women with the formations of white, capitalist, heterosexual citizenship as deviant.

The Bottom, with its alternative anal economy and “regressive” Black men, per white capitalist standards produces a queer Black society outside of prescribed norms. The Bottom is both within Medallion and within capitalist America, but also external to it. As a space of queer non-existence, it provides the perfect site for the growth of Black female queerness. Evelyn Hammonds, feminist scholar and physicist, describes Black lesbian sexuality in terms of a black hole: an “empty place in space” which is actually “dense and full” (128, 133). Because Black female queerness is silenced by ideology and so often invisible in text, its discernment relies on reading what circles around it. In agreement with Stockton’s theory, this stages the Bottom as a space which fosters Black female queerness, and therefore identification. The Bottom is literally collapsing. Stockton illustrates this through the downward movement of the town, when the Black community literally moves down the hill and the “white rich folks from the valley move up” (85). Where a black hole’s collapse results from the darkness of space absorbing the light of a star, the Bottom collapses in the opposite color direction; white gentrification replacing a Black community. Karin Luisa Badt invokes the opening of the novel which describes the literal uprooting of the Bottom: “Where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches...” (*Sula* 3). Badt

holds that rootlessness results from “racist oppression” and the downward mobility of the Bottom results from “racist politics” (569). The displacement of the Bottom operates as a second colonization. The Bottom is a void space, a doubly-silenced by the white heteronormative suburbs which replace it. Figured as a black hole, it is also a physical manifestation of Black female queerness which allows the theoretical space for Nel and Sula’s identification.

At first as children, a great deal of their identification relies on each other’s families. Both girls find “in each other the intimacy they were looking for” and what was missing from their home lives (*Sula* 52). Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek assert that Nel and Sula provide what the other “the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships” (40). Nel provides Sula, with a center, and Sula provides Nel with expansiveness. Identification is not so simple, however. As each girl grows older, she must reckon the identifications with her maternal ancestors. Nel and Sula’s relationship facilitates confrontation of the sexual politics and generational traumas of their female ancestors. But at the same time, latent familial identifications threaten the queer one between the girls. In *Identification Papers*, Diana Fuss details the story of a group of sons murdering and then cannibalizing their father from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913) (32). Fuss uses the narrative to illustrate the repetitive violence of the murder and then the incorporation of “multiple and contradictory identifications” (34). To incorporate an identification with an object (in particular a parental figure) that the subject both loves and hates, identification must be repeated over and over again.

In *Sula*, this manifests in Nel and Sula’s relationships with their mothers and grandmothers. Louise Bernikow, in *Among Women*, asserts that *Sula* “is not a novel about

the viciousness of women. It is, instead, about not knowing, about the ways women deny their love for one another, within the family and between friends” (55). This is true, but Bernikow pays little notice to the specificities of Nel and Sula’s cultural political contexts which coerce the denial of love. It is not a novel about female viciousness, it is a novel about a world where Black women must perpetuate viciousness and negotiate their love both for one another and themselves. While it may be true, as Pin-Chia Feng reasons that “the repetition of the maternal discourse sets up an important network of relations as well as limitations for the self-creation of a woman of color,” it is also easy to mis-read this (81). Relationships between female family members in *Sula* are indeed critical to the self-creation of Nel and Sula and dependent on the social context of all the characters. But it would be remiss to fall into an analysis that characterizes the limitations of those relationships as malicious, nefarious, or anything other than political. Gillespie and Kubitschek point to Morrison’s consistent work on how “the results of mother-daughter relationships damaged by racism and poverty” (29). Though attempting to criticize the racist context in where it occurs, Gillespie and Kubitschek (both white), end up characterizing Nel and Sula and their community as a whole as reductively “broken.” In suggesting that Morrison constructs “mother-daughter relationships damaged by racism and poverty” but at the same time positioning Helene as a middle-class mother who “feeds on her child,” Gillespie et al. present a racist reading with little basis in actual historical paradigms of oppression (31).

The ideological and social context of Black women in America in the 1940s makes it quite difficult for either Eva Peace or Helene Wright to both be breadwinners and nurturing mothers. As Kathryn Bond Stockton indicates in “Heaven’s Bottom,” the signifier of a

successful Black family is measured “by the extent to which they reverse Bottom gender and mime white families” (96). The political grounding for this lies in the philosophy of the Black Baptist Women’s Movement’s “respectability.” Created post-reconstruction, the movement emphasized methods by which Black women might gain the same respect as white women. In Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s canonical text, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church: 1880-1920*, the “religious-political message” takes from “biblical teachings, the philosophy of racial self-help, Victorian ideology, and the democratic principles of the Constitution of the United States” (186). In essence, if Black women were able to attain the aspirations of the white middle-class, they would assimilate into white American culture and secure economic stability and bodily safety. The Black Baptist women’s movement intended respectability as a strategy that would allow “black women to counter racist images and structures” (187). The concept is fraught, for in attempting to secure the (often physical) safety of Black women in a racist society, the movement “condemned what they perceived to be negative practices and attitudes among their own people” and preached “blacks’ conformity to the dominant society’s norms of manners and morals” (187). For in essence, respectability was based upon a principle denoting that the Black middle class was effectively worthier of respect and humane treatment than the working class. With this in mind, Brittney C. Cooper asserts that respectability politics emerge “as a reasonable, though not particularly laudable, approach to protecting the sanctity of Black women’s bodies” (15). So, while Helene Wright’s middle-class aspirations may stifle Nel and promote heteronormativity, her intentions lie in securing the safety of both herself and her daughter. Further, although Eva and Hannah’s easy sexuality may seem to be the less repressive of the offered routes, both

women also fulfill heterosexual narratives.

For the processes of identification in *Sula*, either girl replicating the heterosexuality of her mother also results in the halt of queer identification. As Ronnie Scharfman indicates, “the mother figure represents the first external mirror, eventually internalized, into which a girl-child looks to discover her identity”—but she need not be the last (89). The queer girlfriend demonstrates the second external mirror. As Evelyn Hammonds implores the reader of the queer text to look for the void, so shall this reading emphasize the missing space in the novel (129). *Sula* spans a total of forty-six years, beginning when Sula and Nel are nine and ending when Nel is fifty-five. The first of the gaps appears between 1927 and 1937, when Sula moves away from the Bottom. One can read this “black hole” as a queer one through its bookending scenes: Nel’s wedding to Jude and Sula’s return. Just as Nel and Jude prepare to leave the wedding and consummate their marriage, Sula departs the Bottom: “When she raised her eyes to him for one more look of reassurance, 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” (*Sula* 85). Pamela Thurschwell describes Nel’s wedding as “a joyful one, even if it prefigures a kind of death” (125). The narrative leaves off in a ten-year death, revived only once Sula returns in an effervescent spring. Nel’s wedding to Jude Green also indicates “Nel’s halting movement toward whiteness,” as characterized by Stockton (102). The text explains the strangeness of a “real wedding, in a church, with a real reception afterward” in the context of the Bottom (*Sula* 80). Although it is not difficult to read heterosexuality into a wedding between a man and a woman, Nel’s wedding signals the climax of all of Helene’s white middle class aspirations. In *Beyond Respectability*, Brittney C. Cooper indicates that “in the American heteronormative context, heterosexual acts



between consenting *white* parties have historically been viewed as the most appropriate” manner in which to engage sexually (109). Therefore, the whiteness of Nel’s marriage allows her to cross over the threshold of the middle class, denying the Black female queerness of her childhood.

The event shatters both Nel and Sula’s friendship and as well the identification process. Kevin Everod Quashie reads this in the image of Sula walking out the door at the wedding, seeing the figure as a woman who may be neither Nel nor Sula but a “third woman” who “represents Nel’s union with Sula,” whose departure functions as “a casualty of the marriage” (194). The woman is not Sula, nor is it Nel, but a symbol of their dual self. She is the embodiment of their queer desire and identification. It is critical that this third woman leaves at the moment Nel severs identification with Sula by turning to the heterosexual instead. Nel’s relationship with Jude does not work as identification, for its basis in Jude’s gender suffering. As domestic labor at the local hotel debases his masculinity, Jude marries Nel to soothe his wounded ego by seeking sympathy and bolstering of his self. Marie Nigro indicates that “with Nel, he would be complete... So Nel joins with Jude to once again merge herself with another” (728). Nel agrees to marry Jude by the temptation of being seen as a single person rather than one half of a set. But seduced away from identification with Sula, she is enveloped entirely into a heterosexual relationship which promotes the subjectivity of Jude rather than the two together. Nel and Sula’s girlhood double cannot persist “in the face of social imaginations,” like heterosexual relationships which “that intend to limit Black women’s right to willful self(ish)ness” (Quashie 208). Marrying Jude returns Nel to the ideologically mandated selflessness that Nel and Sula’s identification surpassed. Quashie alleges that through marriage, “Jude

literally becomes a disruption of Nel's process of self-reflection" (194). The black hole, to speak to Hammonds' theory, created by the ten years of missing narrative after Nel's wedding thus engenders the disappearance of the queer.

On the opposite side of the narrative gulf, Sula returns to the Bottom in May of 1937. The narrator describes the spring of Sula's return in terms of the verdant summers of Nel and Sula's youth: "It had a sheen, a glimmering as of green, rain-soaked Saturday nights... of lemon-yellow afternoons bright with iced drinks and splashes of daffodils... the river-smoothness of their voices" (*Sula* 94). Sula and Nel once again meet in spring, indicated the supposed return of identification. Unaware that Nel has truly strayed from the path, Sula holds fast to the identification. This reading helps to explain why Sula chooses to seduce Jude. If Sula still identifies with Nel, sleeping with Jude is an expression of Sula's desire for Nel, rather than a betrayal of her best friend. In her book *Between Men*, Eve Sedgwick discusses the homosocial and male homosexual desire expressed through triangle relationships. Sedgwick draws from René Girard, who sees "the bond between two rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved" (708). Fuss uses a version of this theory to re-purpose triangulation in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) along similar queer lines. In the story, Freud presents an example of adulterous desire is played out at a supper party, where a butcher lusts after his plump wife's thin friend. Freud interprets the wife's jealousy of her friend as a protracted desire for her husband (Fuss 28). Fuss interprets the identification/desire triangle through a queer lens (one that Freud avoids), "The drama of triangulated desire involves more than a case of heterosexual jealousy, wherein "the wife's identification with her husband's desire opens

up a space for a forbidden homoerotic object-choice" (29). Believing via identification that she *is* Nel, Sula assumes a desire for Jude. Jude becomes a mere vehicle; "a convenient identificatory relay for a socially prohibited lesbian desire" (31). This would explain why Sula cannot understand why Nel views her actions as betrayal. Sula cannot fathom why Jude couldn't be shared as they had shared all things, which is why she "was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to" (*Sula* 119). Rather than re-form desire for Sula, Nel rejects her a second time. Because Nel has figured an identification with Helene and her middle class, heterosexual politics, she has halted her identification with Sula. In grief for Jude, Nel shuts herself into the bathroom in her house and waits "for the oldest cry. A scream not for others, not in sympathy for a burnt child, or a dead father, but a deeply personal cry for one's own pain" (108). But no such cry arrives, because the cry is not for Jude at all—it is for the loss of Sula. The cry instead takes the form of a gray ball, "just to the right of her, in the air, just out of view," which follows her until the end of the novel—for as long she denies identification with Sula (108). It seems that fulfilling an identification with Helene, or with the white middle class, also means a life of isolation.

Sula also fulfills an identification with her mother in this scene, if a half-formed one. Hannah Peace, though long dead, was a woman who "could break up a marriage before it had even become one" (*Sula* 44). After the incident and Nel's rejection, Sula begins to search for a new identification, "to fill up the emptiness," as Marie Nigro describes it (730). Sula turns to the heterosexual politics of her maternal forbearer. Like Hannah once did, Sula begins to sleep with the married men of the Bottom. But when Hannah slept with married men, the wives "never gossiped," taking her interest in their husbands as a compliment (*Sula* 44). When Sula sleeps with the Bottom's husbands, the wives cast her out

and accuse her of doing “the unforgivable thing” of sleeping with white men (112). Therefore, Sula’s heterosexuality is an inaccurately replicated identification with her mother. Hannah was generous with her love-making, she “had respected the ways of the community” (Nigro 730). Sula’s inability to properly identify with Hannah stems from her lingering queer identification with Nel. Quashie proposes that the Black girlfriend “offers a rare opportunity for that Black woman to be selfish” (190). Identification is the very process of being self-ish, finding a self in someone else and keeping that self for one’s own. Unlike the “possessiveness” of heterosexual marriage, identification is for the mutual benefit of both, the individual selfish desires of both actors in the identification. Therefore, Barbara Smith’s suggestion that Sula’s heterosexual engagements remain queer rings even more true: she “uses men for sex which results, not in communion with them, but in her further delving into self” (141). The pleasure that Sula finds within her heterosexual encounters is a *selfish* endeavor for her own enjoyment. Which would explain Sula’s failure to replicate Hannah—who always made sure her male partners felt “complete and wonderful just as he was” (*Sula* 43). Although Sula has sex with men, her desire and experiences remain female-centered, self-centered, and therefore queer.

Which would explain why possessiveness, when Sula finds it, results in death. When she first loses Nel, Sula claims to have “no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available” (*Sula* 119). More so than Nel’s love for Jude, she cannot understand the possessiveness that bars Sula from the relationship and from Nel. “Possessiveness” has the operative power of switching a queer approach to sex with men to a heterosexual one. With the power structures in place, Gillespie and Kubitschek theorize that loving men “requires a giving of one’s self and a ‘selfless’ effort to

experience with the other” (44). So, while Sula’s undiscerning sexual encounters with the husbands of the Bottom remain queer, the relationship she forms with Ajax becomes heterosexual once she begins to feel possessive of him. But the relationship first reads as queer. Unlike Jude, Susan Neale Mayberry believes that Ajax “is simply not interested in learning about the community values of marriage and fidelity” (528). Ajax is one of the only men in the Bottom secure in his masculinity, comfortable in the queer inversions of the community. He is comfortable in the rootlessness of life in the Bottom because he has no designs on white middle class upward mobility: “Historically, African American men have had no land, held no dominion; moving is what they do” (527). Ajax likes Sula *because* of her queer approach to sexuality. In their lovemaking, Sula describes digging through the “gold” and “alabaster” and “loam” of Ajax’s face (*Sula* 130). Stockton interprets this as an anal discourse on Sula and Ajax’s sexual behavior, “her rubbing and scraping and chiseling and swallowing surely color her active in intercourse” (111). In this queer version of sexuality, identification *is* possible. But Stockton reaffirms that this cannot last in the context of white heterosexual ideology, for “coupledom signals a ‘paradigm that just doesn’t work’” in the context of Black economies—no matter how queer the heterosexual couple may be (98). As Nel became maternal figure to Jude, Ajax suspects Sula to be “brilliant, like his mother” (*Sula* 128). Sula sinks into the role of selfless caretaker, losing the selfishness she cultivated with Nel and through her queered heterosexual encounters. Which is why, when Sula implores him to “Come on. Lean on me,” Ajax runs for the hills (133). Abandoned for the second time, Sula gives up on replacing Nel and accepts death as the only conclusion to her narrative.

Ajax’s departure facilitates the final earthly meeting between Nel and Sula at Sula’s

sickbed. The two are estranged but still the meeting bears the mark of desire through its natural imagery. While talking to Nel, Sula thinks of “the wind pressing her dress between her legs as she ran up the bank of the river to the four leaf-locked trees and the digging of holes in the earth” (*Sula* 146). The presence of nature and this callback to their childhood mirroring indicates that identification persists between Nel and Sula. Despite the heterosexual interventions and narrative gaps, the two girls remain linked. Rita A. Bergenholtz asserts that Nel decides to visit Sula in this scene on the grounds of being “the forgiving Christian woman” (92). Even faced with Sula’s death, Nel maintains a strict adherence to Helene’s respectability. She alludes that the men who have left them would have been worth keeping, to which Sula responds “They ain’t worth more than me” (*Sula* 143). This is both a token of both her commitment to self, but a commitment to Nel as well, who is after all another dimension of Sula. For the meeting functions as a release for Sula, who finds herself able to sink into death when Nel leaves. Pin-chin Feng believes that in death, Sula “engages in her final step of creating me-ness,” as Morrison paints Sula curled in the fetal position in Eva’s bed, in the “imagery of rebirth” (88). More so than me-ness, it is a death of profound identification. Sula sinks into that “sleep of water” promised by Shadrack in her youth, “down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near,” and remarks, “Wait’ll I tell Nel” (*Sula* 149). The presence of water links Sula back to Shadrack and to Vashti Crutcher Lewis’s characterization of both as “water spirits,” wherein her death brings her back “into the spirit world” (94). By hoping to share the unsharable—birth and death—Sula reaches out once more to Nel with the most transcendent of identifications. Returning to the waters of the river, Sula returns to the mirror play of the girls’, to the first heterosexual intervention in the text of *Chicken Little* (*Sula* 59). Morrison

effectively constructs both a culmination of identification as well as a beginning, implying that Sula will be waiting for Nel on the other side of life to begin their joint development once more.

Without Sula, the Bottom begins to collapse into itself. As the community's most vocal and vibrant representation of queer desire has been silenced, the town crumbles. In a chaotic scene, the novel culminates in a sort of communal suicide, fulfilling the anal discourse of the Bottom's name. On Shadrack's final National Suicide Day the inhabitants of the Bottom become the anal penetrators of the earth as they dance into the abandoned tunnel beneath the river that was meant to link the Bottom to the rest of Medallion: "They didn't mean to go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it... they went too deep, too far..." (*Sula* 161-162). As the tunnel collapses, each and every one of the dancers die. Stockton believes this moment depicts the rage of the Bottom's inhabitants "at their own enforced downward mobility" leading them to "attack the tunnel that figures their relationship to white employment promises" (112). After all, it is this tunnel that promised a properly masculine vocation for the Bottom's Black men and failed them. This final queer penetration of the earth by the people of the Bottom is analogous to the final collapsing of the Bottom into Evelyn Hammonds' black holes of Black lesbian desire—a pleasure discourse on the agency of Black people that has previously "gone under-analyzed" (Hammonds 130).

The group suicide is also an identification act on the part of the Bottom. Literary critic Katy Ryan believes that suicide, in Morrison's texts, operates as "an organizational axis around which meanings revolve—a break in textual time" (390). Ryan also confers that Black communities resist talking about suicide in explicit terms, because of a

“reluctance to identify oneself or one’s community with victimization, powerlessness, hopelessness” (391). Shadrack’s National Suicide Day emerges at the beginning of the novel and remains invisible until its final celebration. National Suicide Day embodies the “revolutionary suicide” that Ryan talks about because it makes Shadrack’s private trauma public. This suicide in particular, the final and most successful of the National Suicide Days, enfolds itself into the text as an example of the violent murder and incorporation of an active identification. For as Stockton pointed out, the tunnel epitomizes the emasculation (and therefore queerness) of the Bottom. The destruction of the tunnel along with the people that it failed, depicts Fuss’s description of identification as a “monstrous assassination” in which “the Other is murdered and orally incorporated by being entombed inside the subject” (34). In this sense, both the victims of National Suicide Day, and the Bottom itself, become participants in a large-scale identification and sublimation process by entombing themselves within the tunnel. The event illustrates a macrocosm of Nel and Sula’s halted identification, a communal catharsis of Sula’s loss.

After the last National Suicide Day, the narrative fades away again twenty-four years—plunging the Bottom into the black hole signified by lack of narrative. When the tale picks up again, it is 1965 and “things were so much better... or so it seemed” (*Sula* 163). Although things may seem “better” for Black Americans in the sixties, the Bottom has finished its steady descent down into the valley, as the white people have moved up to the hilltops (166). Stockton indicates that the gesture to the changing times at the start of the chapter “plays sorrowfully, ironically even, for the Civil Rights was a time of symbolic reversal” (112). For while Black Americans fought for basic humanity and participation in white America, they lost places like the Bottom, which “had been a real place” (*Sula* 166).



Unlike the opulent summers of Nel and Sula's youth, the Bottom appears now in fall, the dying season illustrating Nel's return to Sula. Nel happens upon Eva in the old nursing home accidentally, but in doing so performs a protracted confrontation with Sula. Eva greets Nel with an immediate question: "Tell me why you killed that little boy" (168). Nel replies that Sula was the one who drowned Chicken Little, to which Eva responds, "You. Sula. What's the difference?" (168). This scene invokes Nel and Sula's first rejection of the heterosexual as well as their interconnected identification. To recall Thurschwell's reading of Chicken Little's death, it constitutes "the poles of Sula's self-loss and self-creation" (121). Nel leaves the nursing home, and walks to the cemetery where Sula is buried, looks at the gravestones. The meeting with Eva effectively "collapses time and space," calling back across Nel's lifetime to her childhood as she leaves the cemetery (Quashie 206).

Nel walks down the road in an October rain back towards identification with her girlfriend. Nel looks to the tops of the trees, to nature and to Sula, and realizes that "All that time, I thought I was missing Jude," crying "O Lord, Sula... girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (*Sula* 174). The cry has hovered just out of sight in the form of that ugly grey ball since Nel failed to cry twenty-four years prior, waiting to be released. Michelle Pessoni argues that "it takes a long time for Nel to realize Sula is indeed the missing center," potentially because she has been imprisoned in the grey ball, floating at the edge of Nel's perception (442). Just before she cries, "a soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze," releasing her identification with Sula from where it has been bound for twenty-five years (*Sula* 174). The cry also functions as an identification ritual. Thurschwell reads Nel's cry through Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in which a "patient in the grip of melancholia... recognizes that he has lost something, or someone, but is not certain what he

has lost, in part because of his ambivalence" (123). Thurschwell believes that Nel's heterosexual attachments to Jude have masked her love for Sula. To push this reading further into terms of identification, Fuss also invokes "Mourning and Melancholia," which expresses that "identification works as a form of elegy, remembering and commemorating the lost object by ritually incorporating it in serial replacements... the subject paradoxically destroys the love object only in order better to preserve it" (38). Nel's cry re-incorporates her lost love object, her sister, her other: Sula. It is a cry with no bottom and no top, inherently upside down and inverse, like the queer Bottom. Feng believes that it has the queering effect of releasing "her from the mechanism of repression" (101). This allows Nel to make her way back to Sula and thus back to herself. For Quashie, the relationship between Black girlfriends is an "ongoing unsettling process," one that leads "toward her embrace of her own volatile self" (197). In some ways, this scene is a return to the identification processes of Nel and Sula. In a separate sense, it is the beginning of Nel's development. Perhaps if there were to be a second novel, it would be called *Nel*.

## Conclusion: “What Transpired Among the Women”

*“Together, we spoke a language that was, in tone and content, structure and style, different from the way either of us spoke with men or the way men, we thought spoke with each other, different in ways that went beyond the length of our friendship.”*

Louise Bernikow, *Among Woman*

In the original German definition, the *bildungsroman* genre is meant to demonstrate the linear development of a young protagonist as he ascends into adulthood. Pin-chia Feng notes in her article, “We Was Girls Together,” that such a rendering reflects the “quintessential western bourgeois (male)” perspective (40). The white European and American versions of the *bildungsroman* perpetuate the myth of the independent agent on a journey to “identity.” By the traditional criterion, Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* both “fail” to deliver their protagonists into development. In order for the “coming of age tale” or *bildungsroman* to survive as a genre, the definition must be expanded. *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* prove that a protagonist’s development necessarily occurs in the context of their community, family, and relationships. The coming of age tale which abides by the reductive perception of autonomy and “identity” outlined in the *bildungsroman* form cannot authentically portray reality. Diana Fuss’s “identification,” diagrammed in *Identification Papers* (1995), is a more useful psychoanalytic tool for reading self-development. Not only is identification a non-linear act of necessary “repetition and remembrance,” but it also uncovers the fundamental instability of selfhood in being “only ever partially secure and never complete” (34). A genre about “self” such as the *bildungsroman* does, cannot purport such rigid definitions of human behavior. Thus, reimagining the *bildungsroman* term along the lines of identification pushes the form to a

version which can support all narratives—not just the white and male. Both *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* move the genre away from individualist masculine leanings of the white male *bildungsroman* mode.

Toni Morrison and Sylvia Plath may be contemporaries by some definitions, but they occupy greatly different social, ideological, and theoretical spaces. *Sula* was published just two years after the American release of *The Bell Jar*. *Sula* begins in 1920 and ends in 1965, locating Esther's 1953 plotline in one of the invisible years after Sula's death and before the end of the novel. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther's developmental arc is structured along a violent reckoning of her sexual trauma. The intrusion of heterosexual violence interrupts her development, which only continues once she has destroyed and incorporated the ambivalent identification with her abuser, per Fuss's description of "the violence at the heart of identification" (34). Serially attempting suicide, Esther regresses to a semiotic state of childhood, which permits her metaphorical rebirth into the symbolic order of human language. Once rebirthed in the white, female space of the private hospital, Esther constructs queer identifications with women and begins her proper development. In *Sula*, Nel and Sula follow a dual development of interdependent identification in the queer context of the Bottom, their Black community which exists outside of white American ideology. Nel and Sula's friendship exemplifies Fuss's point that Freud's "homosexuality is never very far from the homosexuality it claims to 'repress'" (45). The girls' relationship, identification, and identification all break apart when white paradigms of heterosexual ideology draw Nel into marriage with a man, Jude Green. The developmental plot is halted for Sula until her death and for Nel until she acknowledges that Sula was always the one she loved, not her husband. The plotlines of both novels regularly resist normative

trajectories; doubling back on themselves, leaving off completely, and concluding without much certainty. Catherine Belsey, in *Critical Practice*, discusses how the “classic realist” narrative of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasizes ideological “closure,” which “ensures the reinstatement of order, sometimes a new order, sometimes the old restored, but always intelligible because familiar” (75). Belsey argues that “closure” is merely a performance of ideological conscription. Novels which problematize ideology, like *The Bell Jar* (to an extent) and *Sula*, culminate in open endings. The irregular composition of *The Bell Jar* and *Sula* therefore should place these novels as *bildungsromans* more authentic and culturally significant than the original German texts.

*Sula* questions compulsions of Black adherence to white American cultural projects and pushes Black women’s queer love forward by highlighting female relationships and criticizing heterosexual ones. *The Bell Jar* engages a proto-feminist discourse on white women’s obedience to heterosexual norms of fifties but fails to effectively disparage or even begin to interrogate America’s, Esther’s, and the text’s pervasive white supremacy. These ideologies reflect not necessarily just what the authors consciously wrote into the text, but more so the unconscious cultural inscriptions of the text. Valerie Smith, in “Black Feminist Theory and the Representation of the ‘Other,’” defines Black feminist literary theory as a way of reading inscriptions of race (particularly but not exclusively blackness), gender (particularly but not exclusively womanhood), and class” that are already always present in all “modes of cultural expression” (370). Smith’s definition is useful insofar that it permits readers of any positionality to engage culturally and socially nuanced readings of texts, but because it surpasses the problem of authorial intent. Though Esther, Nel, and Sula all identify as heterosexual, engage in sex with men, and rarely if at all consider the

possibility of desiring women, each is only able to form mutually beneficial identifications with other women. Queerness need not be sexually explicit in the text, it is inscribed by the divisive heterosexual ideology depicted in both. Each protagonist learns the inadequacy of heterosexual intimacy and its consistent interruption of identification-based development. White heterosexual ideology of the American midcentury requires each character to assume desires for men, but also creating a breach between men and women in both the white genteel spaces of New England and Black working-class communities of rural Ohio.

*The Bell Jar* and *Sula* depict racially enclosed spaces: the Bottom subverts “Black” as the unmarked category rather than white, while Esther’s private hospital perpetuates a white supremacist ideal by its exclusion of racial others. The Black inhabitants of the barred from inclusion in white American heterosexual ideology by inverse economic relations of the Black family wherein the wife can find work, but the husband cannot. As Katherine Bond Stockton suggests in “Heaven’s Bottom,” that accord with white paradigms permits “upward mobility” that inevitably “proves theologically and sexually bankrupt, but downward mobility spells economic suicide for marginalized people” (113). The Black inhabitants of the Bottom are thus required both economically and by white American ideology to pursue upward mobility, but unable to do so without sacrificing Blackness. The Bottom is a site of contradictory discourses, a town slowly collapsing in on itself. Nel and Sula embody the alternative, a “something else to be:” a relationship which exists outside of white heterosexual American ideology, the Black girlfriend (*Sula* 52). The white feminine space of the private hospital in *The Bell Jar* allows Esther to escape heterosexual ideology, but also fosters her preexisting loyalty to white supremacist beliefs and actions. Esther’s subjectivity as a white woman relies on her precarious position in the white American

social hierarchy, perceived to be “below” white men but believing herself “above” people of color. Thus, only white women can offer the possibility of identification for Esther. While Nicholas Donofrio asserts she is “not lacking for female role models,” Esther cannot attach herself to any of the white women she encounters prior to the private hospital (244). In order to develop identification and heal from sexual trauma, Esther must find her place within the male symbol order by first returning to the semiotic in her suicide attempts. *The Bell Jar* thus rejects heterosexual discourse but promotes white nationalism. Free of both men and racial others in the private hospital, Esther is free to pursue identification with Joan, her white, wealthy, lesbian identified double.

Fulfillment of the queer narrative through death operates as a critical determinant in the theoretical framework of both novels. Esther’s serial unsuccessful suicide attempts represent the murderous side of identification: Fuss’s “monstrous assassination” of the other (34). Sula’s death signifies an annihilation of the heterosexual and the sublimation of the queer—“Wait’ll I tell Nel” (*Sula* 149). Additionally, Esther’s last suicide attempt and Sula’s death are both figured in terms of sleep and water. Sula describes her death as a feeling of sinking “down until she met a rain scent... Who was it that had promised her a sleep of water always?” (149). Esther’s “death” personifies as the ocean: “Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep” (Plath 169). Watery death is significant in both scenes as each connotes a rebirth. Sula returns to identification with Nel in death while Esther emerges on the other side of death in rebirth, reading to meet her double. Both novels also end in cemeteries and with an invocation of the semiotic. At the end of *Sula*, Nel visits Sula’s grave and mourns lost relationship for the first time since it ended with “a fine cry—loud and long,” lamenting: “We was girls

together" (174). This moment has the same critical function as Sula's death, heralding the reinstatement of identification and a new beginning for Nel's development. Similarly, *The Bell Jar* ends in the graveyard at her double's burial. Esther's relationship with Joan is much less spiritually and emotionally enduring than Nel and Sula's by all value judgements. So instead of crying for Joan, Esther does not cry out, she turns inward and listens to her body speak, assuring her of its persistence: "I am, I am, I am" (Plath 243). Preceding her release from the hospital in the last passages, this scene affirms the identification of Esther and Joan as the only queer climax available in the ideological context of the novel.

*The Bell Jar* and *Sula*, though different in social context and ideology, engage similar theoretical discourses to explain the development of their protagonists. Esther, Nel, and Sula's social positionalities restrict personal agency (Nel and Sula's more than Esther's), prohibiting the possibility of a classical *bildungsroman* plot. Both are novels of pre-development and broken development, wherein coming of age is only possible through identification with a queer double. Positioning queerness and double as the most essential feature of development de-centers the *bildungsroman* from its traditional definition of solitary growth. Louise Bernikow's text *Among Women* (1980) chronicles literary meetings of women—author to author, character to character, reader to text. According to the history of women's representation in literature, when "a man walks out of a room, leaving two women behind," the two "will argue. Or nothing will happen" (3). Bernikow contests this assertion by analyzing hundreds of texts which exemplify exactly what *does* happen when two women are left alone in a room. In the final chapter, Bernikow struggles through a reading of women positioned against one another in the dichotomy of "light" and "dark," both racially and morally. In summation, she asks the reader to consider oppositions as



“made and not given, constructed and not chemical or theological,” claiming that when this is done, dark and light “can be seen differently and changed” (264). Her perspective is well-meaning and empathetic, but outdated, seeking to bring women together on the topic of *being women* across racial boundaries. Bernikow employs a race-blind philosophy, rather than a race conscious one. Elizabeth V. Spelman, in “The Ampersand Problem” alleges that “We cannot hope to understand the meaning of a person’s experiences, including her experiences of oppression, without first thinking of her as embodied, and second thinking about the particular meanings assigned to that embodiment” (84). Spelman’s article is also outdated, but her philosophy is correct. Examining the ideology which has influenced the living perspectives of Black women and also white women is critical to understanding their texts. Nel and Sula’s development is fundamentally structured around their Black womanhood, just as Esther’s is entirely dependent on her position as an upwardly mobile white woman. Reading identification into these texts, reading queerness into these texts, reading trauma, reading family, and reading community into these texts, relies on comprehensive consideration of the ideology surrounding these texts. Such a reading is paramount. De-centering the *bildungsroman* along the lines of identification as to include a wider amount of narratives is possible only with deference to ideology.

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