"Most Scary Things is Inside": An Exploration of Morality and Community in *Sula* and *Paradise*

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Abstract

In this paper I conclude that Toni Morrison’s early work *Sula* and her later work *Paradise* explore similar themes about the limited nature of binary thinking, including reductive thinking about morality, community gender, and race. I argue that *Paradise*, perhaps because Morrison wrote it over 20 years later in a period that is better able to negotiate binaries though still largely imperfect, offers a solution to the problems with binary thinking Morrison introduces in *Sula*: communal solidarity based on moral hybridity. In order to support my analysis, I engage in a literary conversation with a few literary critics but base most of my paper on my own close reading of the texts.

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"Most Scary Things is Inside": An Exploration of Morality and Community in *Sula* and *Paradise*

In *Sula* and *Paradise*, Toni Morrison presents community and communal healing as possible ways of handling hurt and trauma. For Morrison, communities based on shared hurt are successful when group members have a mutual acceptance, as opposed to rejection or rigid exclusion, of the Other. In *Sula*, Morrison advocates moral fluidity and rejects moral rigidity based on fear of or prejudice of the Other, who, as we see in both *Sula* and *Paradise*, is really an extension or another possible manifestation of the self. In *Paradise*, the Convent women's acceptance of all community members in need regardless of race, class, or gender and lack of judgment of each other is presented as a positive alternative to the exclusive communities of Ruby and Haven in *Paradise* and the two person unit of Nel and Sula in *Sula*. In *Paradise*, Morrison further explores the moral dichotomies she dismantles in *Sula*, revealing a possible (although imperfect) solution to binary thinking: moral hybridity. In *Paradise*, pleasure can be part of the healing process, Christianity and paganism can mix, women who hate each other can help heal each other and themselves, and that which we fear and "other," as the Bottom community does Sula, is really an extension of ourselves, a mirrored reflection of those dark places we dare not tread. If Sula is an example of a character who lacks morals or exists outside of the structure of morality, the Convent women represent moral hybridism in that they join together seemingly dichotomous ideas, such as religion and sensuality.

In *Paradise*, Morrison both expands on her "circular" notion of moral hybridism that ends *Sula* and answers Nel's sorrowful plea for Sula by showing what can happen when a community of women reaches full fruition. Morrison sets up the Convent as a positive (yet realistically imperfect) example of a community of women who ultimately work together to
empathize with each other’s hurts and heal together as a community. Though the Convent women suffer a terrible (yet ambiguous) fate in the novel, Morrison provides in her 1997 work *Paradise* revised notions of morality and community that perhaps reveals Morrison’s belief that society has progressed substantially since 1974 when *Sula* was published. Morrison’s later work reveals a progression in her moral thinking towards hybridism and a progression in the struggle for racial and gender equality that allows fluid communities that accept the Other to exist for a moment in the “reality” of the novel and eternally in an ethereal state at the end of the novel. *Paradise* must end as it does, doubly, with the Convent women being both brutally killed by the men of Ruby and surviving in another realm, as Morrison stresses there is a long way to go and much “work” to be done on the way to achieving “paradise” (Morrison 318), which for her means a society that is radically revamped into an equalized, morally hybrid realm where community is real, if such a paradise is to exist at all in this world.

In “Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: A Satire on Binary Thinking,” Rita A. Bergen Holtz rejects criticism that attempts to define the novel in various set ways, instead reading it as an exploration and satire of “binary (reductive, clichéd) thinking” (Bergen Holtz 89). Bergen Holtz argues that *Sula* should be read as an expansion upon a rejection of the binaries set up by the “nigger joke” (Morrison 4) that the black citizens of the Bottom repeat to each other in the beginning of the novel. In the joke, a white farmer promises a slave a piece of Bottom land, which is in a fertile valley, if he completes a set of chores. After the slave has completed the chores, the greedy farmer decides to back out of the deal. He cleverly offers the slave land in the infertile and rocky hills, calling the land the “Bottom of Heaven” so the slave will be foolishly misled into thinking the farmer has kept his promise. Bergen Holtz points out, however, that the joke may actually be on the farmer, since the white folks later decide the land on the hills is valuable and “change their
minds, move to the Bottom, and rename it the suburbs” (Bergenholtz 91). Bergenholtz argues this joke is significant because it sets up and complicates binaries that will be explored throughout the text: “black/white, good/evil, tragic/comic, spiritual/material, literal/metaphoric, real/fantastic, and free/slaved” (91). In my discussion of Sula I will expand upon Bergenholtz’s idea that Morrison complicates binaries in this novel, particularly focusing on the way she complicates morality and mentioning her complication of racial and gender binaries.

For the purposes of my discussion I will focus mainly on the relationship between Nel and Sula, who together form a tight community. Their friendship begins in girlhood and continues beyond the grave, and it reveals itself through laughter and good times but is based on trauma, both shared and private. The death of Chicken Little, Nel’s awful discovery that white men look at her mother with scorn and her utter disgust and humiliation that her mother seems to accept this, and Sula’s terrible overhearing of her mother, Hannah, telling another woman that she “loves” but does not “like” her own daughter (57) are traumatic events that cause the girls to bind tightly together in an attempt to heal, and move beyond, the darkness of tragedy to the “lightness” of girlhood and play: “Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight” (57). The girls are joined together by trauma and cling tightly to each other until a third member intervenes and causes Nel and Sula to become seeming opposites.

The characters of Nel and Sula, who seem to be moral binary opposites, are treated in a complex fashion in the novel and are perfect examples of Morrison’s rejection of limited binary thinking. Viewed from the outside, or purely by their actions and the community’s perception of them, Nel and Sula become opposites of each other once a third party, Nel’s husband Jude, is introduced into their exclusive friendship community of two. Their connection in girlhood is
powerful: “Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other’s personalities” (Morrison 53). Nel and Sula’s friendship, however, does not withstand either the introduction of Jude to their exclusive community or the different paths their lives take after he enters the novel. When Nel marries Jude, the two are separated as Sula ventures off to school and Nel begins domestic life. And it is Sula’s desire to “share” (119) Jude (since the pair had shared everything else in girlhood) that ultimately leads to the destruction of their friendship. *Sula* is a novel that both glorifies female friendship and tight-knit communities and reveals some of the problems that can arise with exclusion. Morrison shows how destructive communities can become when they are unable to admit other members. Nel cannot (at least in Sula’s lifetime) forgive Sula for her infidelity with Jude, and Sula cannot respect Nel’s boundaries enough not to “share” him.

Once the split in their lives happens, Nel and Sula venture in opposite moral directions. Nel fits perfectly into the rules of society by becoming a faithful wife and mother: “Nel admirably performs all of the obligatory roles” (Bergenholtz 92). When Jude cheats on her with her best friend, Sula, she perfectly fulfills the role of the wife in mourning according to patriarchal standards. She never sees another man again and makes her children and her work her entire life. She even visits Sula on her death bed, going beyond her duty as the wronged wife and charitable citizen. As Morrison points out, however, virtue can be a disguise for darker or more deeply hidden motives:

Virtue, bleak and drawn, was her only mooring. It brought her to Number 7 Carpenter’s Road and the door with the blue glass; it helped her to resist scratching the screen as in days gone by; it hid from her the true motives for her charity, and finally, it gave her voice the timbre she wanted it to have: free of delight or a lip-smacking “I told you so”
with which the news of Sula’s illness had been received in the Bottom-free of the least hint of retribution. (Morrison 139)

In this passage Morrison suggests that virtue, an appropriate response under conventional morality, can be and often is a *performance* that does not always reflect one’s true feelings, but rather interferes with them. Nel *feels* that she wants to scratch Sula’s screen, which seems to be both a playful and loving reference to the way the girls used to greet one another and is revelatory of her underlying aggression towards Sula (Morrison uses the aggressive word “scratch”) since the infidelity occurred. It seems that she both still loves Sula (she must resist the urge to playfully greet her) and cannot forgive her for her betrayal (she resists the urge to blame Sula herself for her illness). She is also curious as to why Sula slept with Jude. Her desire to know “why” springs from her desire to make Sula value what she values. Her disgust at Sula’s selfish motives for sleeping with Jude can be likened to the Bottom women’s disgust that Sula does not sleep with their husbands out of true love or desire for the men, but instead uses them and throws them away indiscriminately, showing no respect for the men and thus no respect for the women who value them. The “true motives” for her charity are complicated, often contradictory, and not entirely “pure” in the traditional sense. However she *feels*, she acts in a way that conforms to standards of virtue. The only way she knows to handle her complex emotions is through the “appropriate” act of virtue, which is her “only mooring,” or only secure way of handling such complexities. Here emotions blanketed under the guise of “virtue,” which Morrison describes as “bleak and drawn” because the performance of virtue disguises the complexity of emotion and motive and causes Nel to act in a way that is dishonest to her true feelings. Nel’s emotions are perfectly understandable considering her relationship with Sula, and
Morrison seems to find fault not with Nel as an individual but with a society that encourages moral rigidity and does not allow for the complexity of life situations and the human psyche.

However, in the character of Sula, Morrison cautions against a nihilistic breakdown of all moral codes and conventions. In contrast to Nel's rule-following, all-suffering, unexamined lifestyle and her focus on the appearance of charitable ways, Sula is the outlaw and outcast of the Bottom society who is almost completely unconcerned with rules or appearances. She sleeps with whom she chooses, refuses to settle down with any one man, and lives alone by choice. Morrison takes great care to describe the inner psyche of Sula, so that a woman who would seem unforgivable and selfish when one considers her acts alone is explored in great depth until the intricate layers which make up her personality are fully explored, leading readers to harshly judge neither conventional Nel nor unconventional Sula, but to see the positives and negatives in both of their personalities.

Morrison creates in Sula a character who does not fit within the bounds of conventional morality. Sula carefully (by her measure) examines herself and accepts what she finds: “She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments--no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself--be consistent with herself” (119). Because she has no ego to cling to and thus need not be consistent with herself, it does not seem accurate to call her completely selfish even as she acts selfishly. Sula's mission in life is to be self-aware, though as her actions against Nel show, she is unable to imagine how others fit into her schema of the world: “Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her” (118). Sula, unlike Nel,
examines herself and is accepting of her own motivations, no matter how “dark” according to conventional morality they may be. Sula’s problem is that she cannot see beyond herself to examine and respect the full humanity of other people. She views other human beings as somehow less real than herself. It seems natural that Sula exists outside conventional reality because, with the exception of Ajax, for whom she feels some sense of “possession” that is not quite “love” (131), she is not a part of the human community.

Is Sula selfish? Yes and no. Is Nel as good as she seems? Yes and no. Even as Sula causes real harm by sleeping with Jude and then, insultingly to Nel, abandoning him casually for other men, her motivations, while fraught with blind spots, are “pure” in that she is unaware of the harm she will be causing Nel because she does not expect Nel to hold true to societal conventions of fidelity that she herself rejects: “She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude” (119). Her lack of consideration for Nel is both selfish because she seems to carefully consider her own psyche more than Nel’s and selfless as she truly does not understand the harm she will cause her friend. Even as Nel does good deeds by getting pain medicine for a dying Sula and caring for her children after her husband leaves her, she also has both pure and impure motives and wastes years feeling spite towards Sula and pining after a husband who has wronged her. However, it is she who realizes at the end of the novel that it has been Sula’s companionship she has desired all along, a startling revelation of forgiveness that shows her ability to put past grievances aside and focus on her powerful connection with her female friend. In the discrepancy between motives and results, results and their implications, motives and simultaneous contradicting motives, Morrison reveals that there is more depth to both the outlaw and the rule follower than limited binary thinking about morality can account for. Both the outlaw and the unquestioning rule abider, however, have their problems, their
“blind spots” that keep them from truly recognizing the complexity and connections between themselves and others.

Though Sula has her weaknesses, her importance in the novel is revealed by the title. As previously mentioned, Sula is a personification of that part of the human psyche that is outside the realm of a conventional morality that Morrison implies is an often imperfect and sometimes arbitrary system invented by humans. When Nel asks Sula why she expects people to love her although she has hurt them, she replies by stating that people will love her when conventional notions of sexual morality die:

After all the old women have slept with the teen-agers, when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones, when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; when Lindberg sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there'll be a little love left over for me. And I'll know just what it feels like. (146)

Here Morrison uses sexual morality as a vehicle to challenge binary notions of good and evil because Sula’s particular sins are sexual, appropriately for Morrison because, as she explains in an introduction to Sula, “female freedom always means sexual freedom” (Morrison xiii). In this passage, Sula tells Nel that people will love what she represents when they realize the arbitrary nature of morality and when they explore the darkest recesses of their thoughts, put their thoughts into action, and challenge the structure of standard morality. Sula will “know” what this love “feels like” because she has been challenging convention all along, questioning the
nature of sexuality, friendship, the self, and the ego. Sula acts as Morrison’s powerful statement against unquestioningly following conventions set by an imperfect and oppressive society.

However, as this quote reveals, Sula goes too far in rejecting all forms of morality, all conventional moral codes, some of which exist for real reasons. For instance, it does not seem likely that Morrison is advocating pedophilia or rape, both of which are highly destructive subversions of power. Morrison seems to be saying that it is good to question standard notions, such as the primacy of heterosexual relations or same race sex, yet she also recognizes that some standards are useful in governing society. One can only imagine the chaos and anarchy that would result if everyone viewed the world as Sula does. Without questioning binary thinking, however, one can never be sure what is truly good and what is merely thought to be good by larger society.

It was the idea of examining good and evil that prompted Morrison to write Sula: “I started out by thinking that one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good-you never really know what it is. It depends what uses you put it to” (qtd. in Bergenbaltz 91). Throughout Sula, Morrison seems to ask readers to examine who is good and who is evil, but by the end of the novel the only thing one is sure of is that such questions lead to answers that are not entirely accurate: “How you know?” Sula questions Nel, “About who was good. How you know it was you?” (Morrison 146). And in Sula, readers don’t know who (if anyone) is “good:” Nel or Sula, promiscuous Hannah, who loves but does not like her daughter, or Eve, who kills her son to save him and jumps out of a window to save her daughter. It is hard to say, in Sula, what matters more, intentions or results, and it is even harder to say which intentions are noble and which are presented as noble but are in actuality self-justifications for wrong actions. Are readers expected to believe that Eva kills
Plum out of love? Are we meant to believe Sula is unaware that Nel will have any negative reaction to her infidelity with Jude? “Good” and “evil” are binaries that get dismantled in *Sula*. In revealing the slipperiness of defining good and evil, Morrison suggests that good and evil are indefinable because they do not exist in pure forms in people because they coexist in a way that changes their meaning as binaries. Both good and evil exist simultaneously in the complex characters in Sula, whose contradicting motivations she carefully explains. In this sense, to take one of the above examples, Morrison suggests it is possible that there is both good and evil in Eve’s decision to burn her son to death. There is good because she wants what is best for him, wants him to die like a fully realized human adult and not like the child he has become in her eyes, but there is evil in that she does not acknowledge his choice in the matter and thus ultimately dehumanizes him.

Black/white is another binary that is explored in the text and is related to notions of good and evil. Bergenb heltz argues that in *Sula*, “Morrison wants us to understand how reductive and destructive it is to affix antithetical labels such as good and evil to entire races of people, although many of the characters in the novel do just that” (Bergenb heltz 92). In *Sula*, Morrison juxtaposes the whites disallowing the blacks to work with them on building a road with the black men’s negative reaction to the rumor that Sula may have slept willingly with white men, a coupling they consider only possible when the white man rapes the black woman. In this way, Morrison argues for the futility of “evil” racism on both sides of the spectrum and does not fully ascribe the blame to one side, showing an instance where black people take a historical white racist stereotype (that no white woman would willingly sleep with a black man) and change it around, to no better effect: “In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did” (Morrison 113). Morrison shows the harmful cycle of oppression
(reinforced by her choice of the word “venom”) in which oppressed groups sometimes subvert
the structure of oppression, reversing the dominant white oppressor/black oppressed dichotomy,
an understandable, yet ultimately limiting reaction that will be further explored in Paradise.

Sula herself is also a complication of binary thinking about lower-class black women. J.
Brooks Bouson examines the ways in which the pairing of middle-class Nel with lower-class
Sula works to eradicate, or challenge, stereotypes of lower-class black women by showing Sula
as a free character with complex motivations and intellectual thoughts:

Through her paired characters, Nel and Sula, Morrison explores issues concerning
class and shame within the African-American community as she examines the
construction of black femininity, and she also uses the dangerously free and
shameless Sula to investigate, if not shamelessly flaunt, the debasing racist
stereotype of the socially unrestrained and promiscuous lower-class black female,
(Bouson 73)

Sula is a notably intelligent lower-class woman who does not sleep with men because she is
insecure, because she has no other options, or because she is base in nature, but because sex fills
in her some desire which she carefully examines. It is not the men themselves that she craves,
but the moments of “cutting edge,” “sootiness,” and even “comedy” (Morrison 122) that the
sexual experience provides. She is the powerful one in her sexual encounters, both afterwards,
when she leaves the men, and during, when she feels the force and power of not the men, but
herself: “And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of
surrender, feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power” (123). Sula shatters stereotypes
that women, particularly black women, particularly lower-class black women, are dull, base, and
powerless. It is also notable that sensual desire is such a large part of Sula’s experimentations
which shatters the stereotype that black women must be willing vessels for the sexual pleasure of others but experience no such pleasure themselves.

The Bottom men’s reaction to Sula reveals the rigid sexism that exists within the community. Sula is doubly judged by the patriarchal Bottom community not only for being promiscuous with the white enemy, but for being promiscuous in such a self-oriented manner. While Hannah’s promiscuousness was somewhat understood by the Bottom community (after all, she was lonely for men because she did not have one and truly valued the men themselves) Sula’s promiscuousness shows a lack of “proper” respect towards men: she uses them and leaves them like a man might do. Sula’s subversion of gender binaries is not accepted by a community that values the rigidity of gender roles.

With all the trouble Sula causes to the Bottom community, it would seem that her death would bring relief, and at first it seems to. However, unbeknownst to members of the community, Sula has been playing a vital role. It is her place outside conventional morality that allows Sula to serve as a vessel in which the town safely contains its evil. Having Sula as a figure on which to project the wrongs brought about by larger society or personal behavior has the effect of causing members of the Bottom community to cling closer together: “Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (118). After her death, the townspeople return to their old ways: “Hard on the heels of the general relief that Sula’s death brought a restless irritability took hold” (153). A neglectful mother turned model mother after she thinks she sees Sula tripping her boy (114) returns to her old ways (153) after she cannot blame Sula for the pain her neglect surely causes her son. Like any good devil, Sula is a figure
onto which people can project the darkness (or that which does not fit into conventional
morality) that exists within themselves. The negative result of projecting one’s own or society’s
darkness onto an outside figure is that the real source of trouble remains unidentified, whether
this source is a structure of oppression or one’s own mistakes. Like Sula, who is blinded by the
idea that she is more real than others and thus unable to fully exist within a larger community,
the people of the Bottom are unable to examine their own dark places and motivations, instead
projecting them on to Sula.

An examination of the two women’s endings reveals Morrison’s conclusions about the
primacy of connection and the possibility of moral hybridism as a possible solution to reductive
binary thinking and Othering. Sula believes that since no one can be exactly like her (can in fact,
be her) that human connection is futile and unnecessary to her self-experimentation. Sula is
seemingly the embodiment of an individual who is completely satisfied with herself. She
insightfully recognizes the desire to actualize the self through the company of others, yet
dismisses this possibility early on when she realizes the Other and the self can never by
synonymous: “And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach
out to and touch with an ungloved hand” (121). Nel cannot be such a version because she is
fallible in Sula’s eyes; she rejects Sula over a man, a sin that seems wholly conventional and
beyond reason for Sula.

Still, it is significant that she longs for Nel at the end of her life: “Well, I’ll be damned,’”
she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (149). Though the Other can never be a
perfect replicate of that which one seeks to extend or fulfill the self, Sula seems to recognize at
the end of the novel that human connection is still desirable. Sula wishes for the companionship
of Nel not only so she will have someone with whom to share in the traumas of life on which
their friendship was formed, but to share with her friend life’s (and death’s) joyful and painless moments. Though Sula thinks she is a complete and self-actualized person, it is notable that her longing for Nel, not the thought that death is not painful, is her last thought. J. Brooks Bouson argues that Morrison further complicates notions of Sula as a hurtful, careless individual by showing her placing value on her friendship with Nel: “Morrison also counteracts her insistent depictions of Sula as misanthropic and contemptuous in this scene by pointing to the primacy of female friendship—a rehabilitative, antishaming gesture that she repeats in the novel’s closure” (Bouson 70). Sula’s last thought, however, lacks the power of the utter sorrow of Nel’s longing for Sula at the end of the novel because although she longs to tell her friend about death, she seems still not to acknowledge the pain she has caused Sula or the pain the lost time has caused the both of them, thus not recognizing the primacy of such connections.

Though Sula is given importance in the title, Nel is given more word time in *Sula*, which ends with her significant revelation. In this way, Morrison refuses to value either nihilism or an adherence to conventional morality, instead revealing the flaws in both forms of thought and action. Morrison reveals in the ending of *Sula* (which leaves readers with Nel) that Other can be a part of the self that we have kept hidden for a variety of reasons, including fear. What Nel longs for in the end of the novel is Sula. Her realization comes after a Sula-like examination of her own thought process. Nel remembers an incident that happened years ago in which Sula accidentally kills a young boy, Chicken Little. The incident happened in girlhood when Sula was playfully swinging the little boy by a lake, his hands slipped, and he drowned. While Sula shows the “appropriate” emotions by crying uncontrollably, Nel remains calm and efficient. Prompted by Eva’s accusation that she “watched” (168) Chicken Little die, Nel muses towards the end of the novel, with horror, on the cause of her calm: “All these years she had been secretly proud of
her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula’s frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation” (170). Similarly to the way her action of virtue at the deathbed of Sula is incongruent with her feelings, here though her reaction is conventional and logical (she does not want Sula to be blamed for an accident) she shamefully remembers her illicit feelings of joy at Chicken Little’s death, perhaps for the sheer excitement of being able to commit such a life-altering deed outside of the watch of society. Perhaps her joy is felt for reasons that cannot be stated, for sometimes emotions do not make logical sense. The unconventionality of her emotions that are hidden under the guise of rationality scares Nel and prompts her revelation that she longs for the unconventional Sula. This incident is juxtaposed with Sula’s earlier unconventional pleasure at watching her mother burn to death: “I stood there watching her burn and I was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (147).

The difference in the two incidents seems to be in the women’s different reactions to them. While Nel is horrified by her own dark thoughts, Sula accepts them as part of herself and moves on. By the end of the novel, prompted by her discovery of her own personal dark thoughts, Nel seems to realize that she is more like Sula than she previously thought and that their friendship is valuable to her. She reaches for her lost connection, tenuous though it may have been and mourns the time she wasted thinking only of their differences. That Mcrison sets Sula and Nel up as seeming opposites who are actually more similar than they think becomes important when one considers her later work Paradise, in which seemingly bipolar, incompatible ideas and people are successfully joined together in the Convent.
An examination of the ending of *Sula* reveals Morrison's final message about binary thinking and community:

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

It was a fire cry-loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

It is notable that the novel ends, not with a climactic “bottom,” end, resolution, or clear picture of Nel’s sorrow and revelation, but with “circles and circles of sorrow,” leaving readers with no comfortable point of ending or departure, precisely the message of *Sula* which rejects binaries such as “top” and “bottom” and “beginning” and “end.” It is appropriate to end the novel with the circle because, for Morrison, binary thinking is problematic precisely because the world is not made up of clear binaries and distinctions. Morality, gender, and race are all fluid and circular in nature so that two polar opposites might coexist in the same circle, so that rule-abiding Nel and the peripheral Sula can coexist and be connected, in this case, through trauma and through their private reactions to Chicken Little’s and Hannah’s deaths. The “circle” Morrison leaves readers with in *Sula* is a metaphor for moral hybridism in which two seemingly bipolar ideas can exist together, in the same circle, a possible answer to questions of morality that she further explores in *Paradise*.

*Sula* ends without fully exploring what can happen when female friendship and communities reach full fruition or the effects of incorporating moral hybridism into these communities. In *Paradise*, Morrison continues to explore moral fluidity and expands upon the effects of separatist, or exclusive communities. In *Paradise*, Morrison juxtaposes three
communities: the all-black communities of Haven which turns into Ruby and the small community of women who live in the Convent on the outskirts of town. For the purposes of this paper, I will mainly focus on Ruby and the Convent though I will mention the ways that Haven changes, as its changes are important to a discussion of the connections between community and moral fluidity. Haven and Ruby are similar to Sula and Nel’s relationship in that they are exclusive communities. Haven and Ruby exclude not only whites but anyone who does not have “8-rock” blood, or anyone who is not extremely dark. In contrast, the Convent is fluid in that its members are constantly changing and because it is an interracial space. Unlike Nel and Sula or Haven and Ruby, the Convent is not divided along racial or even gendered lines, but is inclusive of anyone who needs a place to stay (usually to escape some trauma). Like Nel, her mother, and the Bottom community, both Haven and Ruby are set up according to strict standards of conventional morality. Like Sula, the Convent is Othered by the people of Ruby and becomes a scapegoat for the town’s troubles (which is why the Convent is both literally and figuratively on the outskirts of the town) but unlike Sula, who exists outside morality, the Convent women represent moral hybridism in that their moral code involves a joining of binary oppositions. All of the above communities are formed around trauma, and the ultimate goal of all of the communities is a healing from hurt. Nel and Sula join together to forget hurt, Haven and Ruby memorialize and dwell on the hurt of the Disallowing, while the Convent women ultimately share each other’s pain and eventually heal collectively.

The community of Ruby started out as the community of Haven, which formed after a great trauma for the ex-slaves seeking membership in other black communities: the Disallowing. The Disallowing occurred when the Old Fathers, dark-skinned African Americans who term themselves 8-rocks and would go on to found the community of Haven, discovered
they were not allowed to join the light-skinned community of Fairly, Oklahoma because they were not financially prepared. Interracial racism also played a role in The Disallowing because the light-skinned blacks of Fairly looked down on the dark 8-rocks: “Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves” (Morrison 194). Here Morrison reveals another way oppressed groups subvert oppression, similar to the Bottom community’s subversion of white racism, in this case through Otherting members of their same race.

Just as Sula and Nel learn to take pride and freedom in the fact that they are neither “white nor male” (Sula 52) and form an exclusive community based on this original exclusion, so Bouson describes how Zechariah Morgan, founding father of Haven, transformed the trauma of the Disallowing and the racism they experienced coming from other blacks into racial pride and community: “Turning shame into pride, Zechariah Morgan’s master narrative of what happens after the Disallowing seeks to define the essential nature and collective identity of the 8-rock people. Countering racist ideology of the light-skinned people of Fairly, Zechariah’s controlling story represents the 8-rocks as God’s chosen people” (Bouson 198). Since the people of Haven and Ruby have been discriminated against by other blacks, it is against light-skinned blacks that they turn most of their racial hatred as opposed to turning it against the abstract and distant whites. This (along with the suggestion of black sexual purity untainted by white rapists and oppressors) is why it is viewed as such a crime by the people of Ruby when Roger Best has a child, Pat, with Delia, a light-skinned woman, and attempts to bring his family home. Steward Morgan, a descendent of Zechariah and with his twin, Deacon, one of the town’s important patriarchs, projects the racism his fathers encountered by light-skinned blacks onto Delia: “He’s
bringing along the dung we leaving behind” (Morrison 200). Morrison shows in both novels how the trauma of racism can lead to a furthering in the cycle of oppression—so that racial and interracial hatred can consume members of an oppressed group. It is understandable that such groups would form communities, but Morrison shows how destructive such communities can become when they form new binaries that form new power structures and base their existence around hatred and exclusion.

Like Haven and Nel and Sula, the community of Ruby is based on trauma. In this case the racial hatred that spurred the Old Fathers to form Haven has been subverted in Ruby to an inversion of power structures in which very dark males of 8-rock blood are valued above everyone else. Ruby has a rigid patriarchal structure in which the men rule the town and dissension is not allowed. In “disallowing” dissenting views and voices and conforming to the structure of patriarchy, the town of Ruby mimics the white power structure, which “disallows” deviations from the white male standard. Perhaps the best symbol of intolerance and the change that takes place from Haven’s promising origins to its later demise and transformation into the failed Ruby is the Oven, a structure that was once a symbol of community. Food is, originally, tied to community in Haven when the town gathers around the communal Oven. The Oven is described in terms of community at its origin:

On crates and makeshift benches, Haven people gathered for talk, for society and the comfort of hot game....They pierced guinea hens and whole deer for the spit; they turned the ribs and rubbed extra salt into the sides of cooling veal. Those were the days of slow cooking, when flames were kept so low a twenty-pound turkey roasted all night and a side could take two days to cook down to the bone. Whenever livestock was slaughtered, or when the taste for unsmoked game was high, Haven people brought the kill to the
Oven and stayed sometimes to fuss and quarrel with the Morgan family about seasonings and the proper test for "done." They stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shade of the eaves. (15)

This passage shows the communal spirit the Oven once invoked, and paints a comfortable, comforting picture of a shared, nourishing experience which acts as a metaphor for communal revelry, a collective zest for life, and an exchanging of ideas and opinions. The Oven invokes a shared, but contestable heritage; for example, town members collectively know the term as "done," but good-naturedly dispute its meaning. The Oven that not only fed, but "nourished" (7) the men of Haven and "monumentalized what they had done" becomes a source of contention for Ruby citizens and a symbol of Ruby's demise due to internal dissension which is "disallowed" in a community that values 8-Rock blood and conformity. The Oven originally relieved the women from some of the work that goes into preparing a meal and freed their time for these communal gatherings. In this way, the Oven evoked a collective spirit that included women, thus breaking rigid gender roles and allowing the women a place in the community. Initially, this comforting place which revolved around food and provided license for community members to get together, enjoy themselves, and exchange ideas, seemed beyond disputes over language: "Once the letters were in place, but before anyone had time to ponder the words they formed, a roof was raised next to where the Oven sat waiting to be seasoned" (15). Though the founding fathers paid "little attention" to the meaning of the words above the Oven, instead focusing on the Oven as a symbol of shared good times, free talk, and community, the dispute that arises in the town is ironically over the language written above the Oven. The younger generation wants the words to say, proactively, "Be the Furrow of His Brow" while the older generation views this saying as blasphemy and wants the words to say, "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." The Oven eventually
becomes a symbol of exclusion when young men begin gathering at the Oven to talk
(presumably, about their "radical" views) to the exclusion of others who wish to gather: "A few
young men had taken to congregating there with 3.2 beer, people said, and the small children
who liked to play there had been told to go home" (101). The people of Ruby cannot accept that
language can be arbitrary and that words can have more than one meaning, so the debate
becomes one of either/or is thus, dichotomized. They cannot accept that people and ideas exist
beyond dichotomies. Here the dispute over language is symbolic of binary thinking, which
Morrison has shown to be problematic in Sula.

The Oven reflects the demise of the town as it changes from Haven to Ruby and loses
something along the way. While the community originally started as a literal haven for blacks to
escape the oppression of the racist white community, it becomes a racist place that values 8-rock
blood and privileges those who have it. In "Re-Imagining Agency: Toni Morrison’s ‘Paradise’"
Magali Cornier Michael argues the town of Haven is "grounded in dogmatic racist and
patriarchal terms that simply reverse the racism they themselves suffered by excluding all who
are not so dark as themselves" (Michael 648). Haven, however, does work well as a community
for a short time. The demise of Haven and its failed follow-up town, Ruby, is Morrison’s
statement that reversing binary thinking (ascribing "goodness" onto being very dark and "evil"
ono whiteness) may work or be necessary for a short period of time in order for oppressed
groups to collect themselves and move forward from their trauma, but that such binary thinking
will ultimately become destructive if allowed to continue beyond some necessary amount of
time. Exclusive separatist communities seem to have their place in Morrison’s novels (Sula and
Nel work well together following their respective traumas for a short time) but Morrison does
not advocate long-term separatism and warns against the dangers of exclusion based on hatred.
The community of Ruby is torn by internal dissension which is both racial and generational, as the younger members of the community long to go out and join the larger community because they are bored with the “tedious” (Morrison 113) economic opportunities in Ruby. As the dispute over the Oven suggests, they are also tired of rigid rules and a “disallowing” of dissenting expression. Taken as a whole, the community of Ruby is a symbol of exclusion, oppression, binary thinking, and bloody, patriarchal violence and hatred that leads the men of Ruby to ruthlessly slaughter the Convent women, who, like Sula, are Othered by the community. In *Paradise*, this Othering takes a violent turn while in *Sula*, if members of the community do not literally kill Sula, they are initially glad for her death. Ruby is a community that does not value the individuality or uniqueness of its members, privileges men who hold all of the political and spiritual power in the town, and excludes whites, light-skinned blacks, and anyone who does not conform to rigid morality or who does not hold views set forth by the Old Fathers.

If the rigid structural device of the Oven which originally signaled coalition but has become a symbol of intolerance is a symbol for Ruby, the hot peppers and flavorful barbecue sauce that the Convent women sell is a symbol of the spiciness and liveliness that can exist when the multiple “flavors” (or racial, generational, and life experience differences) of the people come together in harmony. Like Steward Morgan’s taste buds, which have lost the power to distinguish flavors due to tobacco, the community of Ruby has become too bland, too uniform, and fails to accept individual “flavors” the way the Convent women eventually do. However, the peppers have a double meaning that explains why all Steward Morgan can taste is the spiciness of the peppers, which overrides other flavors. Here his wife, Dovey, decides what to prepare for dinner, realizing that a palate that was once picky to a point of stress for her as the sole cook is
now dulled: "Not much point to garden peas. May as well use canned... Blue Boy packed in his cheek for twenty years first narrowed his taste to a craving for spices, then reduced it altogether to a single demand for hot pepper" (81). The peppers are also a symbolic warning to the town of Ruby of the obliteration of individuality and growth that can happen when one dominant flavor (be it 8-rock blood, masculinity, or a rigid moral structure) overtakes all other flavors.

The women who live at the Convent and those members of the community of Ruby who are drawn to the place, like the towns of Haven and Ruby and the community of Nel and Sula, are joined together by trauma. The major members of the Convent are Consolata (Connie), Mavis, Grace (Gigi), Seneca, and Pallas. They have all endured various tragedies in their lives which have led them to seek refuge in the Convent. Consolata was raped as a child and rescued from an impoverished and neglected life in Central America by Mary Magna, a nun whom she follows and idolizes to the time of the Mother's death. She lives at the Convent, which was originally a school for Native American girls. After the boarders leave, a dying Mary Magna and Consolata are joined by Mavis, whose twin babies suffocated in the car while she was in the grocery store buying some wiener's for her deadbeat husband, Frank, who was unsatisfied with the dinner of Spam she originally prepared. Here, the generic and processed nature of the food reveals the unsatisfying relationship between Mavis and her husband. Mavis is deeply disturbed by the incident and finds her way to the Convent after running away from her family, who she is convinced is secretly plotting to kill her. Gigi is wandering in search of a rock formation that looks like a couple making love (a symbol for the close connection she lacks and desires) she has been told about by her abusive boyfriend when she stumbles upon the Convent. Seneca was abandoned by her mother (who she thought was her sister) as a child. Her sister/mother Jean leaves only a note in a box of cookies, Lorna Doones, to remember her by. Here the cookies are
a symbol of motherly love and reflect that Jean herself is just a child (the note is written in lipstick and, appropriately, placed in a box of cookies). Pallas has been betrayed by her mother over a man they shared in common and brutally raped when she makes her way to the Convent. All of these women endured tragedy and are bonded together by hurt. Consolata describes the tales these women tell before they are healed at the Convent: "the timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception, and, what Sister Roberta warned the Indian girls against, drift. The three d's that paved the road to perdition, and the greatest of these was drift" (222).

While both the community of Ruby and the community that exists at the Convent are formed around hurt, the communities are structured very differently. Both communities are ultimately separatist communities: the all-8-rock community of Ruby and the all-female community of the Convent. However, as Magali Cornier Michael argues, the separatist community of Haven, which was originally formed around an ethic of care, "cannot survive" when it operates "only with respect to the chosen families and excludes outsiders on the basis of skin color" (Michael 649). The separatism in the Convent seems to be a separation from moral rigidity itself, as no group in particular is excluded. As opposed to the rigid structure of Ruby, Michael argues that the Convent has a more fluid structure and allows for a shifting of ideas as people and opinions come and go: "Individual interests are always in dialogue with group interests within communities (whether that dialogue is acknowledged or not) and communities are always shifting as members enter and leave and as the interests of individual members change" (645). It is important to note that in contrast to the exclusionist town of Ruby, the Convent accepts all wayward strangers and members of the town of Ruby who seek haven in the walls of the Convent, such as Sweetie, the overworked and overly stressed mother of sick children, Arnette, who comes to bear and reject a child that will die soon after birth, and even a
male, Menus, who is so drunk that when he seeks refuge in the Convent he defecates all over himself. These women and Menus are ultimately not a part of the Convent; they leave on their own accord and badmouth the Convent women. They choose the rigid structure of Haven over the accepting structure of the Convent although they seem to exist on Haven’s outskirts for various reasons. As such, the Convent and its members become a symbol of tolerance. Even though Mavis and Gigi seem to hate each other, they tolerate each other all along and by the end of the novel join together with the rest of the women in the healing ceremony. The Convent’s four steady female members are constantly leaving and returning, drawn to the freedom of expression and tolerance that the Convent symbolizes: “they could not leave the one place they were free to leave” (Morrison 262).

Unlike the exclusionist towns of Haven and Ruby, the Convent includes black women, Consolata, a Costa Rican woman, and one “white girl” (3) who is never specified in the text. Morrison purposely makes readers unaware of which one of the Convent women is white. She describes her reasons for doing so: “I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls’ Morrison comments, ‘until those readers understood that there race didn’t matter”’ (qtd. in Bouson 205). It is no mistake that we are left wondering about the race of a Convent member and not a member of the town of Ruby, where race is always an issue. It seems that racial binaries can be completely broken down only inside the safe and fluid space of the Convent. Another factor that separates Ruby from the Convent is that while both communities contain members of different ages, by the end of the novel the Convent women are working together and helping to heal each other while dissent between generations is destructive to Ruby.
This helping to heal each other takes a caring form in a final healing ritual. Michael argues the novel "seeks to re-imagine agency as a function of coalition processes that are communal and caring in impulse" (Michael 643). The Convent is Morrison's example of a community whose members achieve agency through caring, though the "caring" takes a different, less idealized form than the word usually denotes. I want to note that here Morrison, as she does in Sula, strives for realism as opposed to idealism. Mavis and Gigi want to kill each other throughout most of the novel and Consolata internally judges the women for their "foolish babygirl wishes" (Morrison 222) and lack of plans or direction in life. When the women join together at the end of the novel, however, their coalition reaches beyond differences in age, race, and life experiences, an ending Sula and Nel lack because Sula never could reconcile herself to the differences and similarities of the other.

Descriptions of Consolata cooking precede the healing ceremony and provide insight about what Connie hopes to accomplish with the women. The descriptions of Connie preparing chickens for dinner reveals her hopes of peeling back dark, unexplored layers and inserting spiritual insight and acceptance: "Then, holding the breast in her left palm, the fingers of her right tunnel the back skin, gently pushing for the spine. Into all these places--where the skin has been loosened and the membrane separated from the flesh it once protected--she slides butter. Thick. Pale. Slippery" (253). Another description involves the powerful verb "reclaim" which foreshadows that the women will reclaim their lives and themselves after fully exploring and accepting the tragedies which befell them, when they learn to soak in and reflect on their own psyches or "liquids": "As soon as the hens are roasted brown enough and tender she sets them aside so they can reclaim their liquids" (255).
It is no surprise, then, that Consolata describes the desire to accept oneself through community as a “hunger”: “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you will do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for” (262). Like Sula, these women are hungry to explore their inner recesses. In days gone by, Consolata had a passionate affair with Deacon Morgan, Soane Morgan’s husband and a pillar of the community. He ended the affair in disgust after she bit his lip and licked the blood. With new insight derived from a dream in which she experiences her spiritual self through the form of a male god, she explains that it was not really a man she wished to consume (to know fully) but herself: “My flesh is so hungry for itself it ate him” (Morrison 263). It is the full and accepting knowledge of the self that Consolata teaches the women to crave. If Sula and Nel both have blind spots that kept them from fully acknowledging themselves, Nel because she often overlooks the source of her motivations and Sula because she often overlooks the veracity of the human beings who surround her, the Convent women, through community, an understanding of each other’s hurts, and a full expression and exploration of the ways they have wronged and been wronged have a better knowledge of both themselves and others.

In contrast to Mavis’s packaged meals that she prepared for her husband, Connie’s food is homemade and nourishing to the women, who “hunger” for the time and love that Consolata puts into her cooking. It is notable here that she enjoys cooking and is not enslaved by this traditional “woman’s work.” Cooking is a choice for Consolata, and her desire to cook returns with her desire to live after her long alcohol-laden depression. If Sula broke binaries about women and pleasure, Morrison further expands on the idea by making pleasure an integral part of the healing process of the women. While Sula’s pleasure seems wholly sexual, the pleasure of cooking and eating is also described and sensual terms and provides a powerful message about
the inclusion of allowing oneself to feel pleasure as a part of the healing process. The pleasure Connie takes in cooking can be contrasted with Mavis’s and Dovey’s apprehensions about cooking for their husbands seems to detract from the pleasure of the process. As the women strive to please their husbands, it is clear that the power lies with the men, whereas cooking becomes a communal (and thus, equalizing) process for the women as the cooking duties fall off of Consolata and onto all of the women. By the end of their time together, all of the Convent members are participating in the cooking that the men stumble upon in the rampage scene which opens the novel.

The process of healing is instituted by Consolata, who is both a follower of Catholicism and has recently began engaging in spiritual practices not recognized (and she speculates, demonized) by the Catholic Church. She has discovered, through the guidance of Lone Du Pres, the town of Ruby’s midwife, that she has a talent for healing that involves light passing through her into the body of the healed, which she uses to help Soane Morgan’s son and Mary Magna: “stepping in to find the pinpoint of light. Manipulating it, widening it, strengthening it. Reviving, even raising, her from time to time” (247). Spirituality and sensuality come together in a hybrid in the novel. The women “hunger” to know both the dark, hidden places and traumas that comprise them and the light, spiritual, parts of themselves, and Morrison reconciles these wishes by having the women participate in a healing ceremony that involves Camdomblé, a hybrid of Catholicism and a much older occult religion: “Candomblé...initiates the Convent women into an occult knowledge of the ancestors, thus helping them discover ‘the beloved’: the authentic and divine part of the self hidden behind the socially constructed layers of personality” (Bouson 209). As in Sula, Morrison rejects binary thinking. She does not limit religion to either/or and rejects the binary that religion and sensuality cannot mix. With the Convent
women, however, Morrison goes beyond *Sula* in that she joins together sensuality and healing (instead of merely breaking down binaries) and melds all of the Convent women, whose life experiences, ages, social class, and races differ significantly, into a collective group whose members work together to heal each other (as opposed to the exclusion of Nel and Sula). While she rejects binary thinking in *Sula*, it is not until *Paradise* that she shows the fruits of what can happen when conventional structures like morality are not just questioned, or abandoned, but re-thought out in order to create something new: a hybrid.

During the days of the healing process, in order to help the women fully acknowledge and work through their pain, Consolata has the women lie on the ground and traces their outlines, instructing them to lie in the same spot as they listen to the "loud dreaming," or shrieked confessions of trauma, of the other women. Characteristic of the freedom the Convent provides the women, however, she refuses to tell the women exactly how to lie: "How should we lie? However you feel" (263). The women make drawings and create objects that represent their pain, thus putting their pain into a material form that can be seen, felt, and touched in order to better understand it, exist with it, and eventually move on from it. The physical reality of their creations is symbolic of a full understanding and acknowledgement of their own psyches, something Sula struggles with (she is unaware of the harm she causes Nel) and Nel fears (she is horrified by her years-later discovery of her motivations in the Chicken Little incident) in *Sula*.

The purpose of all of these exercises is to exorcise and learn to exist peacefully with one's own demons, rather than living in fear of them: "In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love" (264).

The Convent women, who are no longer "haunted" (266) by themselves and each other after they come together in love and understanding to hear one another's stories, engage in a
hybrid religious experience together in order to closely examine their own and each other’s tragedies, traumas, and dark, hidden places, are much healthier and happier after the experience. Unlike the founder of Haven, Zechariah Morgan, otherwise known as “Coffee,” they refuse to run from their fear and shame but instead accept it as part of themselves. Coffee disowned his brother, Tea, after armed white people ordered the twins to dance and Tea complied while Coffee refused and took a bullet in his foot as a result. After slaughtering the Convent women, Deacon Morgan has a revelation about this incident: “I’m thinking Coffee was right because he saw something in Tea that wasn’t just going along with some drunken whiteboys. He saw something that shamed him... Coffee couldn’t take it. Not because he was ashamed of his brother, but because the shame was in himself” (303). Just as in Sula, in which the Bottom community Others Sula never realizing their own faults, the shame that we fear, reject, and Other is often the shame that lies within ourselves and which we project onto another whom we can abject. As long as the community continues to Other Sula and project their darkness onto her, they are able to ignore the darkness within themselves. Deacon’s revelation, then, may be that every community needs to Other in order to survive, for people cannot handle the darkness and shame within themselves. While his comment is insightful, he challenged by the Convent women, who eventually become comfortable with their dark places through engaging in a fluid and accepting hybrid community. Coffee has Othered his own shame and light-skinned blacks to the neglect of examining himself, and as a result his community seems doomed to fail.

Their ability to accept themselves and each other leads the Convent women to thrive at the end of the novel despite the men’s attempts to destroy what they Other. At the end of the novel, the women are shown to be thriving though logically they could not possibly have survived the men’s shooting, a binary opposition Morrison allows to coexist. From the
beginning of the novel, readers have been aware that the women will meet a horrible and violent death at the hands of the men of Ruby. The men are determined to kill the women whom they blame for all of the town’s evils, when it is the rigid structure itself that has led to a break down of the community.

Morrison shows the women reuniting with members of their pasts after their terrible deaths. She depicts a scene in which Mavis is shown pleasantly enjoying breakfast with her daughter, using the pleasure Mavis derives from food as an example of how pleasure, spiritual healing and peace can intermix. After joining together in community, the women become powerful figures, visiting reconnecting with members from their pasts even as they are “packing” (310) guns and weapons, which suggests they are on guard for future harm and hurt. As in Sula, by showing the women as both making peace with their pasts and carrying weapons, both ethereal and real enough to enjoy a plate of biscuits and gravy, Morrison rejects binary thinking.

In both Sula and Paradise, Morrison rejects binary thinking and dichotomies of all kinds and in Paradise, advocates a type of community that allows for unconventional, hybrid thinking. She ends Sula with sadness at lost love and friendship, and the Convent women are the loving, caring, (yet imperfect, as all relationships ultimately are) answer to Nel’s sorrowful plea for Sula. Morrison shows with the Convent women, as with the torn relationship between Nel and Sula, that no human connection is perfect, particularly in an imperfect and violent world that leads the women to be armed for battle at the end of the novel having experienced the violence of the men who “kill” them. Not all of the women experience endings as positive as Mavis and Gigi, who gets to reconnect with her father in prison. Though Pallas makes a brief appearance in her mother’s home, she chooses not to speak with a mother who has wronged her so deeply by sleeping with her first lover and abandoning her. Seneca sees her sister/mother briefly but
Seneca does not verbally identify herself to her mother. However, all of the women seem to know just what they need to do before making their exit into an ethereal world and get their jobs done, unlike Sula and Nei who both end on incomplete notes without the community of each other.

*Paradise* ends, however, not with the violent "death" of the women or their reunion with their families but with a spiritual reunion between Consolata and Mary Magna. The two are joined together on an ethereal beach in "paradise" (318) and spy something together: "Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise" (318). The ship Consolata and Mother see which carries passengers who were once but no longer are "disconsolate" and who are both "lost and saved" seem to be the Convent women who have been uprooted by the circumstances of their lives and the men who attempt to slaughter them but have been "saved" by Consolata's healing process and each other. "Endless work" suggests that there is much to be done before the greater world accepts the revolutionary ideas of hybridism, moral fluidity, freedom from oppression, and true community as Morrison defines it. Her placing of the women in an ethereal setting suggests an even greater distance between this grand vision and the reality of the world, but compared to *Sula*, which ends in "circles and circles" of an endless sorrow, *Paradise* ends hopefully, but with "endless" work that must be done in order for people to completely understand and accept themselves and each other, a process which is best achieved through acceptance of the Other and hybrid morality and community.
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