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“My Lonely Is Mine”
Loss and Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze how loss affects the identity of the main characters in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. An examination of the African-American community in *Sula* reveals a history of collective loss, both material and non-material, which limits the identity formation of the individual. This burden challenges the protagonists of the novel, Sula and Nel, as they come of age in the 1920s and continues to trouble them throughout their lives. By first defining loss and identity and then examining how loss affects identity in the community, family and individual, this paper will argue that although loss can limit the individual, it can also act as a catalyst for personal growth. Furthermore, I will show that despite the fact that Sula and Nel react differently to loss they both gain a sense of selfhood in the end.
Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, has written eight novels, all set in African-American communities. Morrison’s novels examine the interaction between the self and the group, particularly how the community affects the formation of the individual (Rubenstein 126). Her second novel, *Sula* (S), opens with a eulogy to a lost neighborhood, the Bottom, a segregated community founded by a freed slave who was tricked by a white landowner to believe that a piece of hilly rocky land was more fertile than the land in the valley. This community contains a history of collective loss. In fact, loss permeates the lives of its residents from the opening of the novel in 1919 to the end in 1965. As Gulreen Grewal explains, this collective loss is an agent that causes “conflicting ideologies of identity […] that give rise to the boundaries of the self” (14). These limits on identity formation challenge the protagonists of the novel, Sula and Nel, as they come of age in the 1920s. This paper will examine the effects of loss on the identity formation of the main characters. By first defining loss and identity and then examining how loss affects identity in the community, family and individual, this paper will argue that although loss can limit the individual, it can also act as a catalyst for personal growth. Furthermore, I will show that although Sula and Nel react differently to loss they both gain a sense of selfhood in the end.

For the purpose of this paper, loss will be defined in both material and non-material terms. Patricia McKee describes how loss manifests itself in *Sula* as “both material losses - missing persons, and parts of persons - and nonmaterial losses - lost relations, lost possibilities […]” (26). This absence of possibility, which McKee also describes as the loss of something that never was, will be highlighted in this paper.

Identity can be defined as ”a conception of the self that is structured in a way as to enhance self-understanding [and is] deeply interconnected with a variety of implicit assumptions, unconscious dispositions, and socially imposed roles” (Moshman 91). This
definition of identity suggests a connection between identity and social factors such as
gender, culture, ethnicity and sexuality, which is in line with the concept of identity
formation that was developed by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. He believed that the
interaction between the social environment and the psychological development of the
individual result in identity formation. Furthermore, Erikson stressed the importance of a
social identity, which is formed when interpersonal relationships with family and
community integrate a person into a particular culture. A functioning social identity
nurtures the “ego identity” and promotes a strong sense of self (Erikson 269). This broad
definition of identity, which includes the psychological and sociological aspects, will be
employed when examining the characters in this paper.

In African-American literature, identity is highlighted in different themes that
focus on black women, such as “the black woman as a suppressed artist, [and] survival,
which includes relationships among grandmothers, mothers and daughters” (Tyson 393).
These themes are developed in *Sula* and are tied to the quest for identity of the
protagonists Sula and Nel. In general, this quest is depicted as a struggle where identity
formation can take the form of a woman sacrificing herself for the greater good of the
family and community or a woman who abandons the role of nurturing others in order to
fulfill her own needs or desires (Tyson 395). These two different routes to identity will
also be highlighted in this paper, since each protagonist follows a different path towards
self-definition; one follows the traditional gender role and becomes a housewife and
mother while the other rejects tradition and creates a life based on her own needs.

Formation of identity for the characters in *Sula* is rooted in the heritage of loss
that reflects the history of the community and the history of African-Americans in the
larger society. The Bottom is segregated from the fertile valley and has little connection to
the rest of the town, since the blacks have no chance for upward social mobility, which,
ironically, would lead them down to the white valley. They remain marginalized and on the lowest rung of the social ladder that has the white Protestants positioned at the top. Even the arrival of immigrants does not change the social structure for the black residents. Since the Irish-Catholic immigrants have white skin, they are placed one rung above the blacks, and they maintain their higher placement by imitating the elite Protestants: “In part their [the Irish] place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old residents’ attitude towards blacks” (S 53). The marginalization of the residents of the Bottom creates a collective loss which McKee labels “a history of missing” and which consists of “people’s knowledge of what they would never become […] things they would never do” (3). The heritage of loss is not only a collection of dreams and visions that are never realized, but the loss of dignity as well: “The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought […] the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers” (S 161). Suffering from a loss of place in the greater community, as well as missed opportunities, the Bottom creates an environment that is insulated and follows its own norms, which are meant to protect the residents from outside forces.

Since the Bottom is used to forces of nature and society working against it, major focus is placed on survival in the face of unavoidable disasters: “Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course […]” (S 89). Just as they let natural disasters run their course, social misfits are tolerated in the community, as in the case of Shadrack, the wounded veteran of World War I: “Once people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him [Shadrack], so to speak, into the scheme of things” (S 15). Yet, despite the willingness to accept or tolerate social misfits, the community is not a setting for free self-expression and development of new ideas. “If collective
marginalization brings about a group’s cohesiveness, it also makes the group critical of radical departures from its norms” (Grewal 44), and the norms that rule in the Bottom have their basis in traditional gender roles. Thus, there are only limited possibilities for personal development in such an environment where neither self-discovery nor individuality is nurtured. Nevertheless, while living in a stunted community restricts the opportunities for growth and success for the residents, the experience can also be protective. Consequently, the community forms the identities of the residents in a paradoxical manner by nurturing as well as limiting growth (Boesenberg 105). The families in the Bottom are protected from the outside forces in their segregated community, but they remain isolated and face limitations in developing their potential.

The two families we follow through the novel, the Peace family and the Wright family, are marked by a history of loss. In the Peace family the loss of the father BoyBoy prompts his wife Eva, Sula’s grandmother, to intentionally lose one of her legs (there is speculation that she put it under a train) so she can collect insurance money. The loss of her leg sets her free from the worst effects of poverty and she uses this inordinate sacrifice to establish control over the rest of her family. Her domination is so complete that she believes she has control over other people’s identities and can dictate who they are (Boesenberg 131). Eva even creates identities for others, which is exemplified in her treatment of three motherless boys she takes in. Although they come from different families, are of different ages and do not resemble each other, Eva names them all Dewey. With time they all end up looking alike and never growing taller than 120 cm. This is an example of Eva’s supreme authority taken to the extreme. Eva has transformed her loss into control and no one is allowed to question her (S 38).

In the Wright family, Helene (Nel’s mother), the daughter of a prostitute, starts a new life by leaving her home in New Orleans, marrying and re-defining herself as an
exemplary housewife. Both Eva and Helene react to loss by re-creating themselves; Eva, becomes a self-sufficient home owner who rules her family with a firm hand and Helene becomes a controlling wife and mother as well as a model church-going resident of the Bottom. Their identity lies in their strength and determination to survive by controlling the forces that threaten to bring them down. Both Eva Peace and Helen Wright are forced to transform their losses into some form of living situation that is manageable, where they can live somewhat independently apart from the dysfunctional pasts that would have destroyed them if they had not changed. But in their efforts to give their children a better life they end up oppressing them: “[The women] create islands of self-righteousness within their families as well as within their communities” (Harris 114). Eva takes control to an even further extreme by burning her drug addict son to death when he does not live up to her expectations of what a man should be. Eva says: “He wanted to crawl back in my womb” (S 71). When she feels that she is losing control she is willing to sacrifice her son. This loss spares Eva the pain of caring for her helpless addicted son and also, since he is a war veteran, allows for financial gain in the form of insurance money that can be collected (S 102).

Eva’s daughter Hannah, Sula’s mother, is also shaped by the loss of a man. Her husband Rekus, Sula’s father, dies when Sula is young. After her husband’s death, Hannah moves back into her mother’s house, “prepared to take care of it and her mother forever” (S 41). Hannah is uncertain of her mother’s love for her and sends her into a tirade when she asks: “‘Mama, did you ever love us?’” (S 67). Eva’s first answer is “‘No, I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’” (S 67). She then adds: “‘You settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t’” (S 68). Hannah does not give any indication that she understands that this statement is indeed proof of love. Eva, the
controlling mother, has the last word and we never learn what the daughter really thinks. Hannah’s doubts about her mother’s love for her may play a role in her ambivalent feelings towards her own daughter, Sula.

These feelings are expressed when Hannah casually states to a friend that she loves her daughter Sula, but she just does not like her. Sula overhears her and is shocked by what she interprets as her mother’s rejection of her. As J. Brooks Bouson points out, Hannah’s words cause Sula to feel unworthy and this leads to a feeling of shame (64). The loss of the security of her mother’s undivided love has repercussions for the rest of Sula’s life. As a reaction to this loss, the shamed Sula will eventually resort to shameless behavior to hide her suffering, a defense mechanism that is often displayed by those who have experienced humiliation and pain (Wurmser in Bousson 48). Sula will later fail her mother when Hannah is burning to death by shamelessly standing by and watching without attempting to save her. Her insolence will become a defining characteristic that alienates Sula from her family, friends and the community.

Sula’s friend Nel also experiences an alienating turning point in her relationship with her mother, during a train ride to New Orleans. Her mother, who is a pillar of the community and has total control over all aspects of Nel’s life, is suddenly exposed as a vulnerable woman in a racist situation. The year is 1920 and the trains are segregated. When Helene and Nel accidentally get into a car for “whites only” on their way to the “colored only” car, they are reprimanded by the white conductor. The “colored car” contains black soldiers in their uniforms who are helpless and cannot come to her defense. Although they wear the uniform of the United States military, they know that they have lower status than the man wearing the conductor uniform. Helene is left to her own devices to get out of the unpleasant situation and does so by giving the conductor a coy, ingratiating smile: “The two black soldiers, who had been watching the scene with what
appeared to be indifference now looked stricken” (S 21). Nel realizes that the men “were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile” (S 22). This humiliation of her mother and the other experiences Nel has on the trip, from the lack of restrooms for blacks to the meeting with her prostitute grandmother, build a self-confidence in her that allows her to identify herself as someone separate from her mother. Helene’s loss of dignity enables Nel to think of herself as an individual, apart from the suffocating mother that restricts her growth (Boesenberg 135). As she looks in the mirror when she returns home she whispers, “‘I’m me […]’ Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (S 28). At this stage, the young Nel feels empowered to explore the world outside of her protective family: “[…] her newfound me-ness gave her strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother” (S 29). In this way, Nel transforms the loss of respect for her mother into growth for herself by acknowledging her uniqueness and imagining self-discovery and new experiences.

Although Sula and Nel embark on their friendship with the highest expectations of positive self-discovery and development, they have no role models to guide them and little possibility of deciding over their own lives. This dilemma highlights the lack of opportunity for black females in the community. “Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be” (S 52). They both dream of something more, yet are unable to identify it because of their limited circumstances. Since both Nel and Sula are complements of each other, they enlist each other’s help to feel complete: “each [girl] virtually creates the other as she sees who she is through the other girl’s eyes” (Rubenstein 131). Sula, from a disorganized women’s world where her grandmother has the last word, and Nel, from a fanatically orderly home that is
controlled by her distant mother, can trade experiences and expose each other to different environments. Loss leads the girls to each other and together they try to discover who they are.

In response to the lack of role models and the non-existence of opportunities to develop, Sula and Nel are open for adventure, and as they go through puberty, the adventures take on a sexual tone. Yet, even their sexual identity is marked by loss as is symbolically shown in the ceremonial digging of two holes. As they excavate two holes using twigs, the holes merge into one. “When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel’s twig broke. With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too” (S 58), thus symbolically disposing of the weak undependable male. The girls then go on to defile the hole by throwing garbage into it. By “trashing” the excavation that resembles a dishpan, a symbol of the role of the traditional woman, and then making it a grave, they kill and bury the norms that dictate their identity. Boesenberg states that ”the scene bespeaks a fundamental ambivalence and anxiety about sexuality and life as an adult woman […]” (110), but I believe that the intensity of the activity signals a protest against traditional gender roles rather than ambivalence about adulthood. After the girls bury the debris “an unspeakable restlessness and agitation held them” (S 59), which I think can be interpreted as anger rather than uncertainty. By burying the norms of society, they can become something more than repositories. Desiring something more without actually knowing what that “something more” is leads the girls to seek new adventures in their search for selfhood.

Shortly after this ceremony, the weak male, personified in Chicken Little, a young boy, is accidentally disposed of when he slips out of Sula’s hand as she swings him around when she is playing with him. Chicken Little flies away, lands in the river and drowns: “The water darkened and closed quickly over the place Chicken Little sank […]"
There was nothing but the baking sun and something newly missing” (S 61). There is no struggle to survive and the girls do not try to save him. This accident can be seen as a continuation of their rite of passage, where the little boy is disposable, just as the broken twigs that represent the male. The incident also marks the loss of childhood for the girls (Boesenberg 111). It can also be seen as a turning point in their relationship since their roads will diverge and their search for identity will no longer be a joint endeavor.

The impact of Chicken Little’s death coupled with her mother’s previous remarks about not liking her, cause Sula to become disoriented:

As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life - ever since her mother’s remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow. (S 118-119)

Sula has an identity disturbance that leaves her detached not only from others, but from herself as well. Her life becomes experimental because she has “no ego” (S 119). Furthermore, she has failed to achieve a social identity within her family and community because of the limitations of both to nurture her growth. Erikson believed that disturbances that are a result of unstable environments can lead to a revision of one’s identity (Cote 16). In Sula’s case, the disorientation sets her free and she becomes a tabula rasa. This view is supported by Boesenberg when she states that Hannah’s words and Chicken Little’s death are “places of lack [which] also function as a blank page on which Sula’s new identity can be projected” (Boesenberg 112-113). This emptiness, which results in instability, serves as a catalyst for her unconventional life. Sula can create
herself and become an experimental woman, inventing herself as she goes along in the
spirit of a suppressed artist, a theme that Lois Tyson discusses when examining self-
identity of women in African-American literature (395). The fact that Sula lacks an outlet
for her artistic talent limits her potential to truly define herself, but she is willing to take
risks to explore new possibilities.

Nel, on the other hand, sacrifices herself for the good of the community by
taking on the established gender role and marrying a man who needs her to bolster him.
Her husband Jude, a young black waiter, is aching to do a man’s work, yet there are no
construction jobs for blacks in 1927. Therefore, when Jude fails to get a real man’s job, he
seeks to prove his manhood by getting married, but in reality he looks for a wife who can
comfort him and ease his sense of loss: “He [Jude] needed some of his appetites filled,
some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his
hurt, to care very deeply” (S 82). At first, Nel is indifferent to his wooing, but when she
realizes Jude is suffering and needs her, she falls for him and goes on to become his
second mother (S 83). She provides her husband with a shoulder to cry on, commiserates
with him and eases the pain of his loss of manhood. She takes on the role of mother and
wife instead of carving out her own identity, thus following the norms of the community
and the gender role promoted by her mother. Nel’s childhood dream to see the world will
never be realized. In addition, she loses Sula: “Nel’s transfer of her symbiotic attachment
from Sula to Jude severs the bond between the two girls that had supported both of them.
From that point on, they are both partial people each lacking emotionally what the other
originally supplied” (Rubenstein 135). Although Nel’s marriage to Jude appears to be a
joint project, it lacks gender equality and places her in a subordinate role where she works
to build up her husband’s self-image instead of her own.
Sula follows her own path by rejecting the norms of the community and leaving
town on the day of Nel’s wedding in what appears to be a pursuit of a new life. Sula’s loss
of Nel appears to be a catalyst for her to live her experimental life outside of the confines
of the Bottom. Her manner of leaving without saying goodbye to anyone, not even Nel,
shows her rejection of the gender role for a woman in the community. As Boesenberg
states, “Sula sets off for the horizon in a manner reminiscent of traditional male
*Bildungsroman* heroes” (115). She pursues a higher education, moves around, and returns
home after ten years. Her flamboyant return to the community, looking like a movie star,
creates a stir of mixed wonder and irritation among the residents. Sula does not share the
information of her life outside of the community, although there is mention of a college
education and some dissatisfaction. Returning to the community seems to go against the
development that Sula is seeking, since she returns to a place where she is already
marginalized. Rubenstein believes that Sula “is drawn to return to the Bottom after ten
years because her community is the crucible of her identity” (138), but I do not
completely agree. It is in fact Nel who completes Sula’s personality: ”Nel was one of the
reasons she had drifted back to Medallion, that and the boredom […] (S 120). Therefore it
seems likely that Sula hopes to resume her joint quest with Nel in some way.

Sula’s role as an outsider is firmly established by her actions when she returns.
When her grandmother tells her that she needs some babies to settle her down, she
responds: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Sula further
asserts her independence by sending her grandmother to an old age home: “I [Sula] ain’t
never going to need you [Eva]” (94), which indicates that she is willing to lose her family
in order to be free to be herself. But, being one’s own person is not a concept that is
understood by the community, and what is considered self-evident to Sula is viewed by
the residents as self-indulgent and selfish. As the Bottom tries to fit her into the scheme of
things, there is agreement that she is upsetting the balance since she shows no remorse when her actions hurt others. Sula fails to understand Nel’s reaction when she sleeps with Jude, but she realizes that she and Nel are alienated: “She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing” (S 119). Sula sees Nel as “one of them” (S 120), the women in the community, who play the roles of victims very well. Nel belongs to the town and the town has marginalized Sula, which makes Sula realize that the complement she is looking for, “that version of herself which she had sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand” (S 121), does not exist, at least not in Nel.

Nel’s loss of her husband and her best friend is so painful that she equates it to death: “Death itself was the essence of bad taste. And there must be much rage and saliva in its presence. The body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the hands should have no peace, and the throat should release all the yearning, despair and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss” (S 107). Reacting to loss with rage recalls Chicken Little’s funeral, where the congregation mourns their own lost childhoods in the guise of mourning for Chicken Little (S 65). Nel mourns the death of her marriage, and the loss manifests itself in a gray ball that follows her around. “She spent a whole summer with the gray ball, the little ball of fur and string and hair always floating in the light near her but which she did not see because she never looked” (S 109). To cope with the loss she needs to talk to someone who understands her feelings, but since that person is Sula, Nel has no outlet for her frustration and pain: “That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk about it because it was Sula that he had left her for” (S 110). Nel loses her identity as a wife, which she mourns since it means that she loses her sexual identity as well, “for now her thighs were truly empty and dead too […]” (S 110-111). With no husband, she cannot have a sexual identity as the norms of the community and the church do not allow
it. To keep her place in the community Nel is forced to live her life solely as a mother who serves her children, the community and the church. Nel throws herself into her new role. She also starts to work, becoming a single working mother who has to draw on her strength to survive under conditions where there are minimal opportunities for women. “Virtue, bleak and drawn, was her only mooring” (S 139). She continues to bear her sorrow, encompassed in the gray ball, but refuses to look at it or confront it. Nonetheless, by refusing to be immobilized by her loss, Nel shows signs of growth using this survival strategy. Also, the fact that she can work and provide for her family reveals strength and the will to carry on.

While Nel is embraced by the community, Sula is branded as an evil force and becomes a scapegoat that the residents can blame all their misfortune on. Although they do not drive her out of town, they do label her a witch. “Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another” (S 117). Hence, Sula’s refusal to follow the norms of the community is a catalyst for positive changes in the residents. When Sula is identified as evil, the community can then displace all their evil on her, which makes them feel that they are righteous (McKee 22). Sula appears unaffected by the ostracism of the residents of the Bottom. “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” (S 118). Yet, in her project of self-discovery she does not abandon the quest for her missing half and this is highlighted in her relationship with Ajax.

Sula and Ajax do not follow the norms of the community, and both are characterized by indifference. Ajax becomes interested in Sula because she “was perhaps the only other woman [aside from his mother] he knew whose life was her own, who
could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him” (S 127). Sula is attracted to the conversations they have, which give her an outlet for her brilliance. Thus, the identity of Sula as an intelligent person is promoted by her interaction with Ajax. Also, in her relationship with Ajax, Sula has a new type of sexual experience where her independence is symbolized as a tree: “[…] she rocked there, swayed there, like a Georgia pine on its knees, high above the slipping, falling smile […]” (S 129). Morrison’s placement of Sula in this position shows that Ajax is comfortable with a woman who is independent (Fultz 2). But, from Sula’s perspective, this role is frightening since she senses “an awful height” and “the height and swaying dizzied her” (S 130). This dizziness may indicate that such an independent role may be too much for her to handle.

Metaphorically, the tree trying to put down roots in the rich soil can be Sula’s desire for a deeper relationship with someone who can be her complement. In her relationship with Ajax, Sula moves from being a woman who needs nothing more than herself and who acts amorally in her relationships, to a woman who suddenly wants to possess this man: “Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least a desire for it” (S 131).

Sula’s relationship with Ajax can be considered a slip up, since it conflicts with the notion that she wants to make herself. The fact that she forms an attachment to Ajax indicates that Sula wants to have a meaningful relationship with someone, and since Ajax is a man, she sets out to keep him by becoming the stereotypical supportive female. She says: “Come on. Lean on me” (S 133), when Ajax gets in trouble with the law. This attempt to bolster her man with supporting words is no different from Nel trying to ease the pain her husband suffers because of injustice and racism. Thus, Sula is willing to take on the same identity that she criticizes in Nel, namely that of the subordinate supporter.
Furthermore, her relationship with Ajax highlights the predicament of Sula as an artist without a medium. When she imagines herself rubbing away the surface of Ajax’s face to reach the inner “loam” (S 131), she is attempting to know all of him. But she realizes that “nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity” (S 136). Her effort to keep Ajax by using traditional means fails and Sula vividly experiences his absence from an artistic perspective (Boesenberg 124). “His absence was everywhere, stinging everything, giving the furnishings primary colors, sharp outlines to the corners of rooms and gold light to the dust collecting on table tops” (S 134). The loss of Ajax does not impair Sula’s artistic vision, if anything it heightens it, but she still has no opportunity to channel this creative energy and an identity as an artist is not an option for her. The absence of a medium for the artistic Sula is another example of loss manifested in missed opportunities.

The loss of Ajax is followed by Sula’s terminal illness, which is neither named nor related to her failed relationship. The reunion with Nel on Sula’s deathbed turns into a confrontation where Nel attacks the dying Sula’s so called male behavior. Nel reminds Sula of her limitations: “‘You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man’”(S 142). Sula responds: “‘You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?’” (S 142). This statement appears to promote gender equality, but when Sula goes on to say that she is similar to the black man and hints that she would leave her children if she had any, she identifies with stereotypical negative male behavior. Boesenberg states that motherhood is at the center of Nel and Sula’s conflict (125), but I do not agree. More importantly, Sula is willing to sacrifice everything to claim her identity and refuses to see herself in any female role endorsed by the community whether it is mother, wife or the strong abandoned woman represented by Nel. Considering that her attempt to keep a man by employing traditional feminine tactics has
failed, Sula has every reason to abandon the role. She is determined to take her strong
sense of dignity with her to the grave. The deathbed scene defines the identity that Sula
has shaped for herself, an identity that goes against the norms for women in the
community and against the established criteria for friendship and relationships in general.
Since a woman cannot have it all, the only way she has to create herself is to define
herself as a single entity, even in her misery: “‘I got my mind. And what goes on in it.
Which is to say, I got me’” (S 143). There is no other way for Sula to define herself. Her
potential to develop is lost in the space of untapped resources, the missed opportunities for
the community and its residents. The last moments of her life are painful, but Sula slips
away, alone, with a sense of self, in the awareness that “[…] my lonely is mine” (S 143).
Yet, the moment Sula realizes that she has no pain and is dead, she wants to share the
news with Nel: “‘Well, I’ll be damned, she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell
Nel’” (S 149). In spite of her declaration of lonely selfhood on her deathbed, Sula feels
connected to Nel, and she finds happiness in the anticipation of sharing her new adventure
with her, something Nel will never know.

With time, Nel transforms the gray ball of sorrow to self-realization. But this
happens when she is older, in 1965, after a confrontation with Sula’s grandmother Eva,
who accuses Nel of having a role in the death of Chicken Little. Nel realizes that she was
more than a bystander when Chicken Little flew out of Sula’s hands and that she actually
enjoyed what she saw: “Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken
Little’s body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment” (S 170). Faced with the
disturbing truth of her complicity in the death of Chicken Little, Nel questions herself:
“How come it felt so good to see him fall?” (S 170). She suddenly sees herself aligned
with Sula and against the community (S 171). Nel visits Sula’s grave and reminisces about
her funeral. She is the only one from the Bottom who goes to the funeral, thus separating
herself from the condemning community in what appears to be a temporary protest, but not quite a breaking away. Instead, it takes Nel 25 years to realize that the loss she has suffered most from is the loss of Sula, not her husband. As Grewal states: “Nel’s emergent consciousness is the breakthrough the novel offers” (47). With this realization, she is free as symbolized by the breaking up of the gray ball: “A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. ‘All that time, all that time I thought I was missing Jude.’ And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up to her throat. ‘We was girls together’” (S 174). Her cry releases her repressed sorrow of losing her friend. Just as Sula defines herself as an individual, so can Nel re-claim herself and the spirit of self-discovery that was part of the joint project of two young girls who “had set about creating something else to be” (S 52).

In conclusion, the material and non-material losses that the characters of Sula endure create an environment that seems to hinder identity formation. In order to have a strong sense of self, individuals must be nurtured in their social relationships, namely, in their families and community. When a society is infused by loss, this nurturing is replaced by norms and limits that are meant to protect the individuals but can also restrict their growth. Many reactions to loss are purely tactics for survival in the face of pain and despair. Other reactions are creative attempts to define an individual’s place in the framework of missed opportunities. Although loss can cause pain, it can also be a catalyst for change and growth as shown in the development of the main characters. In spite of the limited experiences and dashed hopes and dreams, Sula and Nel, at the end of their lives, claim a sense of selfhood that may be limited, but, considering their circumstances, shows signs of growth despite the burden of loss.
Works Cited


