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A Voice from the Shadows: The Novels of Toni Morrison

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INTRODUCTION

The three novels of Toni Morrison to date deal with elements of both the feminine and the African consciousness. The dominant characters developed in her novels act within a socially isolated black community, and often in a largely or wholly female household. The values embodied in her novels, as well as the imagery and language, are derived in large part from African culture and archetypes of the feminine unconscious.

If Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious is correct then many of these elements are availailable merely by virtue of being human.[1] Studies by Stanislav Grof further suggest the existence of an ancestral memory which can reach back through many generations and centuries, tying members of a race to their ancestral beginnings.[2] Aspects of black American family life and value systems suggest the carryover of African tradition despite the destructive forces of American slavery.[3] Links to the African past have been drawn to black American music,[4] folk literature, and language.[5]

Morrison herself, in an interview with the New York Times Book Review, asserts her conscious use of black language rhythm and style: "it's graceful and powerful and like what I've always remembered black people's language to be."[6] Poet Eugene B. Redmond cites a "highly developed sense of sound and rhythm" in black language, epitomized in the black oral sermons of the twenties and carried into their literature, showing "some kinship with the innate grandiloquence of their old African tongues."[7]

About Song of Solomon, Morrison states, "I also wanted to

use black folklore, the magic and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic."[8] A belief in magic and sorcery is a dominant belief throughout Africa.[9] Black American folk tales of Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby have definite roots in traditional African fables.[10] As Redmond states:

> Personal background, then, combined with studies allows us to state that folklore (especially animal stories and fables), song styles, tonal utterances and many general practices and customs tie the black American to his African starting point.[11]

As I will show, Morrison evidences this in her novels.

In a book review of Sula, reviewer Barbara Smith writes, "As significant as her rootedness in Black life, is the fact that her perspective is undeniably feminine."[12] The feminine consciousness expressed in Morrison's novels involves archetypes and principles available to and rooted in all cultures and peoples, represented by the diverse mythologies of Greek, Indian, African and American cultural beliefs and religions. These are concepts that exist cross-culturally and unconsciously. There is also an aspect of her feminine perspective that is grounded in the fact of her womanhood, and the life she has led as a woman in a patriarchical culture, as nearly all women have. This experience gives her a unique voice in the realm of black literature, just as her Afro-American background gives her a unique perspective of the feminine consciousness. In effect, she is giving voice to a double shadow in the white male culture of America. At the base of all her novels is what Morrison said she "found so lacking in most black writing by men": "a sense of joy, ... a sense of comfort in being who one is."[12]

I. The Woman as Artist: A Unification of Opposites

As black and female, Toni Morrison speaks from a doubly muted perspective. Both distinctions place her in a position of voicelessness in the white male culture. As an artist, she is faced with a further difficulty: integrating her feminine role with that of an artist. One is passive and selfless, the other active and self-centered. Woman is expected to be self-sacrificing, connecting, interdependent with others: one who defines herself in terms of her relationships. The artist is self-seeking, individual, independent: one who defines himself in his own terms:

> Woman and artist are two mutually exclusive categories because women are by definition preservers while artists must be able to destroy.[13]

Because of this conflict, women writers have typically had difficulty in creating a heroine who is also an artist. There is no standard mythic pattern to work within. Heroines are archetypally sacrificing, supportive, inspiring. Artists are traditionally egoistic, experiential, inspired. Female characters that act as artists appear traditionally as failed women: the nagging wives, the whores, old maids, and cruel or negligent mothers. Grace Stewart, in her book, A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, explains the dilemma for the writer:

> Her heroine may therefore remain disintegrated, estranged, or unsuccessful -- a failure as a woman or as an artist. . . Seeking to unify her tortured self . . . the heroine-artist may accept the traditional view of the female as supportive and also accept the image of her artist-self as a monster or an aberration of some kind.[14]

This is what happens to the characters of Nel and Sula in Morrison's Sula. Nel, the archetypal female, takes on the responsibility of a husband and family, accepting the traditional role of nurturer, supporter, sacrificer to the needs of others. When her husband leaves, she carries on without him, working selflessly to support their children. She is crushed by the loss of both her best friend and husband, relationships that were important to her. Yet she retains the purity expected of her, the high moral standards, cutting off her friendship with one who meant so much to her, Sula.

Sula is the "aberration" of a woman artist. She sacrifices for no one, throwing her grandmother into a nursing home and "stealing" her best friend's husband. She is experiential, enjoying life as a traveler might -- observing people, ~~traveling~~ traveling from town to town, taking on and as quickly dropping many lovers; she never becomes grounded in a relationship, and spends most of her life unattached to anyone emotionally.

Morrison confirms this split image in an interview:

> there was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and . . . if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something the other one had.[15]

And in Sula:

> Her craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay . . . she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.[16]

Because the artist is a masculine stereotype, Sula is presented in connection with masculine imagery: air and fire are associated with her -- she burns up with fever "high above the elm tree" on a top floor (p. 128), her mother and uncle burn to death, birds (air) accompany her on her return to the Bottom. Her amoral independence is man-like to Nel: "You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't. . . You can't act like a man," (p. 123). Her sexual attitude is masculine; until Ajax she becomes emotionally attached to none of her lovers, thinking she liked "the sootiness of sex and its comedy," (p. 106). She is independent, experiential ("hers was an experimental life," (p. 102), neither mother, wife, nor good daughter (she watches in delight as her mother burns on page 127).

Sula is a study of opposites, an attempt to unify opposite forces, ideals, images, for this is the struggle of the woman artist, the black American, the woman in a patriarchal society. Thus the contradiction of a town at the top of a hill named "the Bottom" and the irony of the white people moving there and kicking out the blacks after they had shunned the place for so long. Thus the attraction of Nel for Sula and of Sula for Nel, when the two are so opposite. Thus Shadrack's unceasing devotion to Sula.

Shadrack's life is a ritual of order: his house is kept obsessively neat, much like Nel's, he avoids people, fears change, and observes a rigidly scheduled life-style. Sula leads a life of chaotic disorder: she fires the maid and neglects the house, she takes many lovers, fears sameness, and frequently changes lifestyles. Whereas Sula is associated with the element fire,

Shadrack is closely allied with water, the feminine element: he lives by a river, where he fishes daily; he gets drunk; he identifies with fish where Sula is identified with the birds that accompany her return. Despite their differences (in fact because of them), Shadrack thinks only of Sula for years until her death, the only person to mourn her death consciously. Yet Sula is repelled by the man, expressing extreme horror at the only occasion of their meeting in her adult life reported in the book: "When he tipped his hat she put her hand on her throat for a minute and cut out. Went runnin' on up the road to home," (p. 101).

The repulsion and attraction of opposites is central to the theme of Sula. The men in the story never succeed in a relationship with the women of the novel. There is a struggle to unite the concepts of freedom and responsibility, expressed in the friction between Nel and Sula, Eva and her deserting husband, Boy-Boy, Nel and her deserter, Jude. Nel and Shadrack struggle to integrate the idea of death with life -- Shadrack with Suicide Day (the chance to kill your neightbor or yourself and get the unexpectedness of death out of the way for the year), and Nel with "much rage and saliva in its presence," for death is itself, "the essence of bad taste "(p. 92).

The love Nel feels for Sula in the end is the triumphant unifying of opposites that began Nel and Sula's friendship. Nel recognizes Sula in herself under Eva's prodding, and her tears for the loss of Sula are also a release of the artist aspect of herself; the imaginative, experimental, masculine side of her repressed self. Her grief is a universal one for the repressed and rejected "aberrations" in all of our personalities. For the black female artist, it is a long-awaited cry.

II. African Ethos

All of Morrison's books relate a basic African ethos: survival of the tribe over survival of the individual. African philosophy is anti-egoistic, non-individualistic. As Wade Nobles explains in his essay, "Africanity: Its Role in Black Families": "for traditional Africans, it was the community or the family which defined the individual."[17]

Nobles divides the African ethos into two basic concepts: "(1) the survival of the tribe, and (2) the Oneness of Being."[18] Calling the family, "one of the strongest cohesive devices in traditional African life," Nobles defines "tribe" as the extended family, including all those related by ancestry or marriage, dead, alive, or yet to be born.[19] The tribe, or family, is, for the African, a functioning unit, not a collection of relatives under one roof. This is reflected in the interchangeability of roles within the family; children may raise other children, wives may work to support the husband, fathers may keep house while their sons bring in money. Individuals are socialized to see no "important distinction between the personal self and other members of the family."[20]

The principle of oneness is demonstrated in Sula by the three "deweys," boys of widely different racial backgrounds and varying ages whom Eva adopts under the same name:

> She looked at the first child closely, his wrists, the shape of his head and the temperament that showed in his eyes and said, "Well. Look at Dewey. My my mymymy." When later that same year she sent for a child who kept falling off the porch across the street, she said the same thing. Somebody said, "But, Miss Eva, you calls the other one Dewey."

> "So? This here is another one."
> When the third one was brought and Eva said "Dewey" again, everybody thought she had simply run out of names or that her faculties had finally softened.
> "How is anybody going to tell them apart?" Hannah asked her.
> "What you need to tell them apart for? They's all deweys." (p. 32).

The three boys start school together, seem to associate exclulively with one another, and are all punished for the misbehavior of one. Eva, and eventually everyone, treats them interchangeably. Despite the fact that one is Mexican, one black, one has red hair and freckles, and their ages span three years, people find they cannot tell them apart: "they spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy"(p. 34).

This socialization process destroys the individuality of the person while reinforcing group identity. The deweys themselves (whose names even lose their capitalization) accept their group identity totally, each "joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name ... inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves." Each child comes out of "whatever cocoon he was in at the time his mother or somebody gave him away . . . becoming in fact as well as in name a dewey" (p. 33).

The community of the Bottom reflects this behavior in its own way. When Sula returns, she is despised collectively, and after her death the people mourn collectively though indirectly:

> A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the general relief that Sula's death brought, a restless irritability took hold . . . Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair" (pp. 131-2).

They fall to their deaths in a group, missing Sula's presence. A group instinct takes over as they follow Shadrack to their deaths like "a pied piper's band "(p. 137), and leap over the gate to the tunnel "like antelopes"(p. 138). It is no coincidence that years later, most of the survivors thought it was the deweys who had followed first.

Song of Solomon portrays a more positive aspect of the African ethos. Milkman, Dead like Sula, is at first very self-centered, individualistic, and apathetic to his family and community. His accidental discovery of family ties to residents of a small Virginia town stirs him out of despondency in search of his family heritage, his "people":

> All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word: "I live here, but my people ..." or: "Do any of your people live there?" But he hadn't known what it meant: links.[21]

In his search for family "links" Milkman discovers his interdependence with other people, with the earth, with all life. His experience of "oneness" is with both nature and his "people," even as the Bottom reflected its moods in the weather, in a plague of robins, in the death of the river's fish when the community had died, showing a deep link between the natural world and the people in it.

Lost in a Virginia backwoods, alone under a gum tree, Milkman becomes aware of this "Oneness of Being" :

> Under the moon, on the ground, alone . . . his self -- the cocoon that was "personality" -- gave way. He could barely see his own hand, and couldn't see his feet. He was only his breath, coming slower now, and his thoughts. The rest of him had disappeared(p. 280).

Like the deweys, he comes out of his "cocoon" of individuality and all but loses himself in a larger awareness, though his is much larger than the deweys'. For Milkman, it is this integration with nature that allows him to see his connection with other human beings:

> He felt a sudden rush of affection for them all, and out there under the sweet gum tree, within the sound of men tracking a bobcat, he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him.
>
> Down either side of his thighs he felt the sweet gum's surface roots cradling him like the rough but maternal hands of a grandfather (p. 282).

Milkman expands his identity in space by broadening it to include nature and other people. He expands his identity in time when he discovers his ancestral past, his family mythology, in Shalimar. For Milkman, his family truly comes to include the dead, the living, and the distantly related, for every child on the streets of Shalimar is singing the story of his ancestor's flight from the cotton field back to Africa: "Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home" (p. 307).

Because the African definition of the individual is dependent on the family, Milkman's character expands along with his expanded definition of his family. He accepts responsibility for jilted Hagar's death, Guitar's hatred, his family's dependence (p. 280), and returns home to pass his knowledge on to the rest of his family. "It is via the . . . family system that its members become conscious of their own being, purpose, and responsibilities toward oneself and other people," writes Nobles.[22] And "overarching the notion of fa-

mily is the concept of kinship . . . based on the philosophical principle of the 'Oneness of Being' or one with nature."[23]

Milkman's search for his"tribe" in Virginia and Pennsylvania is for him a reunion with all life. He returns the heritage of the tribe to its living members, symbolically joining the dead to the living, and initiating the return to "Oneness of Being" for his tribe. The paradox is that Milkman and Pilate both die in the end. This signals the end of the Dead family, but does not preclude the survival of the tribe.

If the definition of "tribe" is to include the dead as well as the living, as Nobles has suggested it does in the African tradition, then death of the physical body is actually irrelevant to the concept of tribal survival. What is important, then, is the tribal mythology, memories: an awareness of and respect for tribal heritage. Milkman does enter this awareness and bring it to his living family members; the Dead family becomes aware of its heritage. The tribe survives in one sense: its mythology lives on in the town of Shalimar, where his extended family teaches it to their children -- but the Dead family will die because it can produce no more children.

The living members of the Dead family (the living Dead, fittingly) are a dying and sterile loveless unit. Macon and Ruth, Milkman's parents, haven't had sexual relations since Milkman was conceived. Milkman's only two siblings are women in their forties, childless, unmarried. Lena still lives at home under the strict eye of her father. Corinthians lives with a member of the "Seven Days" band of murderers, all of whom have taken an oath never to have children. Pilate's daughter Reba is about the age of these two women, and unmarried. Her one offspring,

Hagar, dies childless, as do Milkman and his cousin Guitar. Without children, the recovered heritage will die with the living members of the family. The Dead family will die out.

Milkman, indeed, was the Dead family's last hope for survival. At the time he arrives in the family, his father is alienated from the community and his own family. He no longer has sex with his wife or maintains contact with his only living relative (that he knows of), Pilate, his sister. In fact he deeply hates both. As rent collector for much of the town, he is cruel and hated by the community. His daughters are peripheral to his life, ignored, perhaps resented. Both his parents are dead.

Milkman only exists because of the magical nourishing attentions of Pilate, who gives his mother Ruth a potion of herbs which moves Macon to fertilize her womb. While pregnant with Milkman, Ruth comes to Pilate for protection from her husband, who tries repeatedly to abort the child. Pilate explains the reason for her efforts when she tells Ruth, refering to Macon, "He ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us"(p. 125). Her statement expresses her concern for the continuity of the tribe in the family, demonstrating the concept that "the dead, the living and those still-to-be-born of the tribe are all members of <u>one</u> family."[24] Pilate embodies the African ethos, because she fights to keep the family alive, even aginst the will of her own brother.

Milkman's long affair with Pilate's grandaughter, Hagar, appears hopeful for reuniting the family at first. The relationship is incestuous, however, between cousins, and becomes an actual threat to Milkman's life when he calls it off. Hagar

seeks him out monthly with an axe, unable to bear his rejection of her. The Dead family remains a sterile, loveless unit, true to its name. Indeed, as soon as the name was given to the family -- by a white man's error -- to Jake, father of Pilate and Macon, death claimed the family one by one. Pilate's mother died in labor, her father was shot to death when she was twelve. Pilate comes to Michigan to be reunited with her brother Macon, but he wants nothing to do with her. The family falls apart.

It is only in the town of Shalimar that the tribe survives. When Pilate and Milkman die ~~in~~ at the ~~town~~ home of their ancestors, then, they are the only members of the Dead family to survive, for in death they are united with the rest of the tribe and become part of its vast mythology. Pilate's and Milkman's death is a rebirth -- an ascension, not a descension. A bird flies off with Pilate's symbolic soul -- her bronze earring with her name inside which she's worn since her father's death. When Milkman throws himself over the cliff, taking Guitar with him, he "rides" the air that his great-grandfather is fabled to have flown on to Africa. Morrison does not say whether he rides up or down, but the implication is a feeling of freedom, a kind of rebirth like that granted Pilate by the bird:

> Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees -- he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could <u>ride</u> it (p. 341).

The Dead family, true to its name, survives only in death. The tribe lives on, though, in Shalimar, where the whole town is

descended from Jake's father, Shalimar.

In Sula, the community of the Bottom is essentially one tribe. Everyone seems to know everyone else, and to help those neighbors in need. Eva takes in the orphaned deweys just as a neighbor takes in her children when her husband first leaves her, expecting no payment for the favor. The tribe of the Bottom, like the Dead family, survives only in death, in memory, in mythology. After that final Suicide Day in which half the town drowns, the Bottom disintegrates as a community. White people move in, forcing the blacks into the valley. Families fall apart. The Bottom is left "to the poor, the old, the stubborn -- and the rich white folks"(p. 143).

A few of the older members of the living survivors remember the Bottom and how it had been before it died. They talk of the drowning and argue about who died first. At the end of the story, the only ones we see left are Nel, Eva, and Shadrack. They are separate, growing further apart, just as the community is. Nel visits Eva, who accuses her of Sula's crimes and alienates her. Nel leaves Eva angrily and passes Shadrack, who at least recognizes her, but at last cannot even remember who she is. Their passing of each other is representative of the growing separation between living members of the once living community or tribe of the Bottom:

> Shadrack and Nel moved in opposite directions, each thinking separate thoughts about the past. The distance between them increased as they both remembered gone things (p. 149).

Nel, the epitome of the Bottom's values and unity, is seen by Shadrack as the woman "with the sunset in her face" (p. 149), symbolizing the "setting" of the oneness (sun-like) of the Bottom.

The members of the Bottom who died on Suicide Day at least died as a unit -- they maintained their connections to the community. To them the tribe survives. To its living members, the community has fallen apart:

> The Bottom had collapsed. . . It was sad because the Bottom had been a real place . . . Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by (p. 142-3).

The river is polluted; no fish live there anymore. The Peace family is dead except for Eva. Only those who died while the Bottom was still a "real place" survive -- as part of the mythology of the Bottom.

In The Bluest Eye, Pecola's problems of alienation and self-denial are representative of those of the black community she lives in. She mirrors her tribe's destructive impulses: self-hatred, vulnerability, and the resultant inability to identify with her own people; as Claudia calls it, "all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed."[25]

Through her failure to cope with or "survive" her own life, we are shown the most frightful possibilities of the breakdown of the tribe. Her family is unstable, her parents both separated from their respective families. The extended tribal connections have been lost in the attempt to adopt those of the

white community -- her own mother prefers another woman's white child to herself. Pecola's child dies, symbolizing the sterility of the tribe. The surrounding community refuses to accept her into their tribe, and her family effectively dies, just as Eva and Sula Peace's, just as Pilate and Milkman Dead's.

Survival, then, is not mere existence or life. It is confirmed identity. To the African, identity revolves around the group. Individualism and egoism stand in the way of identity survival, for the individual is mortal, but the tribe survives even death, in mythology.

III. Mythological Aspects

Much about African mythology is essentially feminine. The feminine principle embodies the dark, the wordless, the irrational and mysterious. It also includes archetypes of the Mother, the Virgin, and the witch. Both associate strongly with the moon, as do these archetypes. Both Sula and Song of Solomon borrow widely from these concepts, especially in the characters of Eva and Sula Peace, and Pilate Dead. These characters explore the traditional feminine archetypes in a search for the complete person.

Throughout traditional Africa, sorcery is associated with femininity because of the mysterious nature of both.[26] The sorcerer, or witch, acts only at night, and, according to African writer Dominique Zahan, one tribe explains that "the woman more than any other creature is intimately related to 'darkness' and 'night' because she is the most mysterious and unfathomable."[27] Among this same tribe, the Bambara, woman is considered clairvoyant

but incapable of reason. She is the irrational being, who, "in contrast to man, . . . always follows the inclination of her desires."[28]

Silence in the Bambara culture is considered superior to speech, which is the mother of silence to them. The Bambara believe that "silence is the ultimate reality" and perform rituals to teach tribal members its virtue, saying, "if speech constructs the village, silence builds the world."[29] Darkness, silence, and mystery lie at the base of traditional African religion, as does the irrational power of magic and sorcery.

Although neither is widely worshipped in primitive African religion, the sun and moon are deified as strength and wisdom, respectively.[30] The moon, identified with the female principle in many cultures, often is in traditional Africa too. Whereas the sun is generally more highly regarded in most cultures, many traditional Africans believe the moon was created before the sun, and was originally more powerful, large, and bright. One myth of the Luyia people tells how the younger sun challenged the moon to a wrestling match and was thrown down. The sun, however, pleaded for mercy and was let up. They fought again, and this time the sun won, throwing the moon into the mud, dimming its brightness. So it was that the sun became the brighter and dominant one of the two.[31]

The moon is an archetypal symbol of the feminine. It is associated with the menstrual cycle, night, birth, and rebirth. Native African women of some tribes pray to the moon for renewal of life.[32] Tao philosophy associates the feminine with "the dark

side of nature,"[33] even as the moon has a dark side. Thus the shadow is considered feminine, and the Kikuyu people of Africa have been reported to value their shadows so much that they do not venture out-of-doors at noon, for fear that their shadows will be lost.[34]

The three phases of the moon are associated with the three stages of a woman's life; the maiden in its first quarter, the old woman in its last, and the pregnant mother in its full phase.[35] Queen Elizabeth, the virgin queen, was symbolized frequently by the moon. Artemis, moon-goddess of the hunt in ancient Greek mythology, is virginal. In primitive Africa, the moon is often personified as the "Queen Mother", or as the goddess Mawu, woman and mother. The Pygmies say the moon created man.[36]

Perhaps the most important attribute of the moon, however, is its ability to regenerate: to grow and fade in appearance, then to disappear and start over again each month. It is changeable, cyclical. It is associated with life, death, and rebirth. Some African Dahomey tribes do not allow a child to be nursed until the coming of the new moon. The Hottentots of South Africa tell a story about the message from God that got distorted along the way to man, "that as the moon died and lived again so would they."[37] Indeed the aim of African spirituality is rebirth: "For such is the paradox of African spirituality . . . the mystic 'dies' in order to relive."[38]

The importance of witchcraft and sorcery is central to many of the African religions. There is no personified "devil" as such in most traditional African religions, so evil is attributed to sorcery or witchcraft, and almost always associated with women,

and the feminine. The religious leaders of most tribes are magicians, or "witch-doctors" concerned primarily with combating witches and black magic, or sorcery. Although there is a distinction between witches, who devour the souls of their family members and enemies, and sorcerers, who use charms and incantations to harm others, both are associated with night, both are essentially feminine, and the distinction between the two is not always drawn.[39] Magicians and priests are rarely female. As Geoffrey Parrinder states, in African Traditional Religion, "the male role is to combat witchcraft, and keep women in subjection . . . the antagonism of the sexes is an important factor in the belief."[40] This "antagonism of the sexes" is representative of a deeper symbolic opposition between the feminine and the masculine polarities, as represented by the sun and the moon, the active and passive forces of nature, darkness and light, and all polarities, which can be classified as such.

One important polarity in the religious belief of traditional Africa is that of the social and the un- or anti-social. Because of the emphasis placed on the identity of the group, anything that opposes its cohesion is considered evil. Although the feminine is usually concerned with relationship, and thus more closely allied with the social in western thought, African tradition regards it in the same class as sorcery, thus allying it to the unsocial, the evil: "the 'sorcerer' and the reality to which he belongs are classed on the side of evil, the night, destruction, and the antisocial, while the 'magician' belongs to goodness, light and the day, construction, and the social."[41] This polarity becomes important in Morrison's characters of Sula and Pilate, both of whom retain some distance from their society.

Unlike the African outlook, Morrison's presentations of the feminine are highly positive and strong. Her strongest characters are women, her dominant themes those that concern the family, interelatedness, and love, expressed through a woman-centered world: Claudia's mother-headed household, Eva Peace's woman-run house, and Pilate's all-female home. In her last two novels, Morrison creates an aura of strength and mystery akin to supernatural power around the major female characters. Eva Peace, Sula Peace, and Pilate Dead are such characters. Their mysterious past, unexplained powers, and peculiar independence all lend to their almost mythological strength.

Eva Peace, grand-mother of Sula, raises three children to maturity without a man or other family member to help. She nurses them through severe illnesses, cold weather, and near-starvation. Then she disapoears for eighteen months and reappears with only one leg, and enough regular income to build a three-story house and support her children and herself for the rest of their lives. Those eighteen months remain a mystery, explained only by Eva's fabulous stories about how her leg got up one day and walked away, or how a corn on her toe grew and grew, gobbling up her whole leg (Sula, p. 26). Her past is mysterious, her life her own creation. Needing no man, her house becomes "completely dominated by women and by their own perceptions of themselves and the world."[42] She holds the power of life and death, for as she creates and sustains her offspring, so she kills one, perhaps two (Plum, perhaps Hannah on the way to the hospital).

Sula, like Eva, needs no man. She seeks only herself, and lives according to her whim. She is strong in herself, though

this strength does not translate into caring for others, as it does for Eva and Pilate. She does stand strong in the face of hatred and accusation by her community, though, and does not change to please anyone. Like Eva, Sula also has a mysterious past of ten years when she was supposedly away at college. She discusses it with no one. The town brands her as a witch, a devil, and fears and respects her. All kinds of bad luck is blamed on her, and Morrison implies her power over the town by the mysterious mass "suicide" that ensues her death, adding to her aura of larger-than-life super-human existence. She and Eva reappear at the end of the novel to bring Nel into realization of her inner self, asserting an almost mystical presence about the two Peace women.

In Song of Solomon, Pilate emerges from the start on the scale of a demi-goddess. She is born with no navel, from a dead mother, symbolically self-created. Deserted by her father, who is killed, and her brother, who mistrusts her, Pilate Dead is rejected by society after society because of the absence of her navel. She is forced to become self-sufficient.

In adulthood she consciously re-creates herself, throwing away "every assumption she had learned" and beginning over again, "at zero" (p. 149, Song). She is a "natural healer" (p. 150), a bootlegger, a single mother, outside of natural and man-made laws, outside of custom.[43] Her past is a mystery to the people of the town -- even to her own brother. She lives with her daughter and granddaughter in a house with no electricity, rickety and primitive, close to nature, and "just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people" (p. 150).

Like Sula, she has fashioned her own life, but like Eva, she nourishes others with her strength, healing with herbs, protecting Milkman and Ruth from the violence of her brother Macon. At the funeral for her grandaughter, Hagar, Pilate is compared to a tru mpeting elephant (p. 321). Her bronze earring "blazed like a star"(p. 321). Her transcendent authority is confirmed at her death when a bird flies away with the symbolic bronze earring she has worn since childhood. More than either Sula or Eva, Pilate Dead looms larger than life.

For the highly developed characters of Eva and Pilate, woman is not "the 'void' which can only be appropriated by being filled," as Zahan asserts.[44] She is not passive, formless, and empty, but active, self-formed, and full. Except for Sula, the major female characters are complete in themselves, needing no one. Because no character in The Bluest Eye acheives this potential, I see the three novels as a progression toward this positive female-image, culminating in Pilate, failing at first in Pecola Breedlove. Although they are much stronger and more self-aware than Pecola, neither Nel, Eva, nor Sula reaches the transcendence Pilate does by the end of Song of Solomon. Eva sacrifices too much to her children (her left leg), Nel and Sula fail to develop the aspects of themselves that the other represents.

Pecola fails because she allows others to create her. She is the "void waiting to be filled," not the self-created person of Eva , Sula, or Pilate. She is the scapegoat who absorbs "all the waste and beauty of the world (p. 159, Bluest Eye). Even her special dream, for blue eyes, she cannot give to herself but must seek from a man -- a mulatto of doubtful mental stability. She

entrusts her deepest self to strangers, having neither the strength nor the belief in herself to transcend those who would drag her down around her.

Just as Pecola beats the air "in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly" like a "winged but grounded bird " (p. 158), Pilate symbolically ascends in the mouth of a bird. As Milkman says, "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (p. 340, Song). Pecola cannot because she has sacrificed her strength for the egos of others, smaller than herself. Her dream of having blue eyes is a sacrificing of her racial identity for the vanity of a white-oriented society.

Morrison's philosophy links racial identity with strength. Just as Pecola goes mad because she cannot accept her blackness, Hagar dies rejecting her dark kinky hair and brown eyes. She believes Milkman would love her if only she had "penny-colored hair," "lemon-colored skin," and "gray-blue eyes" (p. 319, Song). Nel Wright, on the other hand, sees her blackness in a mirror at night and says aloud to herself, "I'm me." Nel, whose imagination has been driven "underground" (p. 16, Sula), forms a deep friendship with the imaginative Sula after this powerful with herself. The power, the inner strength, gained by this revelation is expressed: "each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear" (pp. 24-5, Sula).

Shadrack, too, has this moving experience in a prison cell shortly after his release from a mental hospital. In his disturbed mind he imagines his fingers to be growing out of control. He becomes obsessed with a"desire to see his own face." At last

he sees his reflection in the water of the prison toilet bowl, and it changes him:

> There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real -- that he didn't exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk . . . and glanced at his hands. They were still (p. 11, Sula).

Directly afterward, he falls into "the first sleep of his new life." This is followed by a re-ordering of his life which culminates in his institution of a "National Suicide Day" as an outlet for his insanity. His fingers never grow again. National Suicide Day becomes a part of the culture of the Bottom, becoming "absorbed" -- "into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives" (p.13, Sula). It is on this day in 1941 that the community, following Shadrack, falls to its collective death in the river.

Sula needs others to feel her own strength. Her most powerful sense of identity comes to her in the act of making love, when she feels, "particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center . . . feeling her own abiding strength and limitless power" (p. 106). She seeks out Nel to complete herself, "the other half of her equation" (p. 105).

Sula personifies the negative aspect of the feminine become active and uncontrolled. Like the traditional African witch or sorceress of Bambara belief, she is "an incomplete creature; indeed [she] is the only being in creation which does not possess

a dya, that is a double," and so pursues an "incessant quest to regain [her] dya."[45] She is the formless, "an artist with no art form" (p. 105, Sula), she is the "shadow" of the Bottom, a "devil" (p. 101) -- unpredictable and amoral. In accordance with Zahan's description of woman, "she always follows the inclination of her desires."[46]

The moon appears in Sula just before Shadrack performs his final Suicide Day rite. On page 133 we are told that "he had spent the night before watching a tiny moon." His thoughts wander from there to Sula. He associates her with two things: a purple and white belt she left there as a child, and a robin that once flew by accident into his house, much as Sulahad as a child.

The purple and white belt that Shadrack treasures is a symbol of eternity, echoing the "always" that he said to Sula as a child. The circle of the belt and its mystical colors of white and purple could also represent timelessness or the unifying of opposites (purple is a mixture of the cool color blue and the warm color red -- like the colors of water and fire. White is a mixture of all the colors in the light spectrum), as Sula and Shadrack are certainly opposites(see pp. 5-6 above).

The robins that appear with Sula's return to the Bottom fly gloriously but only briefly, chaotically, just as Sula "flies" through her three wild years in the Bottom. As Pecola flapped her arms in a vain effort to fly, and Pilate flew without even leaving the ground, the intermediate character of Sula flies dramatically but briefly, aimlessly, earning only the fear and distaste of the community, as the robins do.

The bird is associated in Greek mythology with the moon-

goddess Artemis, who lived in the woods, away from society, independent of men, virginal. Nor Hall, in her book The Moon and the Virgin, writes, "Artemis brings certain caged aspects of feminine nature out of exile. When she puts on bird wings she is woman liberated."[47] Sula can be likened to the virgin goddess Artemis: experiential, wild, wandering, free from men's control. As Hall explains, the virgin archetype includes the prostitute and the unwed mother, for "to be virginal does not mean to be chaste, but rather to be true to nature and instinct."[48]

Sula's life is like that of the wandering moon. She returns to Medallion with the brilliance of the full moon, "dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see," amidst a plague of robins (p. 78, Sula). Just before her death she appears "naked as a yard dog" (p. 111), having shed the splendor of the full moon.[49] Her death at thirty years of age is reminiscent of the moon's cycle of thirty days. When she dies, we are told that "Medallion turned silver" with ice (p. 130). Silver is the color of the moon.

Whereas Sula is the virginal aspect of feminine nature, Pilate is the mother archetype. She helps Ruth to conceive Macon's child, and treats him as she would her own son. She is protectress of her daughter, Reba, and grandaughter Hagar. The comparison to an elephant on page 323 is an allusion to the matriarchal society of the animal; she is the nurturer, healer, and protectress of the young. She is mother even to herself, as she births and teaches herself, deprived of her mother.

Magic and ritual is also a prominent undertone of Song of Solomon. Pilate's herbal potions and communication with her dead

father lend her the aura of a witch or supernatural being. The secretive nature of Milkman's visits to Pilate heighten the ritualistic atmosphere of her household. On page 49, the three women, cleaning grapes off of a vine, break into spontaneous harmony in song as Milkman and Guitar watch, breathless. Milkman, overcome by this powerful ritual, "thought he was going to faint from the witght of what he was feeling."

If Sula was the evil sorcerer of African myth, then Pilate is the good witch-doctor; she is the healer, not the destroyer. Whereas Sula destroyed families (stole husbands, abandoned her grandmother), Pilate unites and creates them, through Milkman and her descendants (Reba and Hagar). Both Sula and Pilate are conspicuous within their societies, an African sign of evil, for "the sorcerer and sorcery are associated with the singular and the unique."[50] This is one African association that Morrison plainly rejects by making Pilate so singular and unique, and yet so good and loving.

Morrison's blending of both traditionally evil and good and attributes, male and female characteristics in Pilate (her name and her haircut is masculine), is a unifying of opposites necessary to complete a fully individuated person, which Pilate finally is. As Milkman says, "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (p. 340).

CONCLUSION

Morrison's novels, taken together, voice the basic African philosophy as expressed by Geoffrey Parrinder in African Mythology, page 15 :

> Proverbs and myths express joy in life and human activity. It is a word-affirming philosophy, in which life on earth is thought of as good, despite human suffering, sex is to be enjoyed, and children are the gift of God. The family is not only husband and wife and children, but the extended family of grandparents, brothers, sisters, and cousins, in which people are honored and cared for.

The femininine overtones in all of her novels echo stronger than the African ones, perhaps. The African themes of family, kinship, and ancestry are pronounced, and pervasive. But they are expressed through the feminine conscience. It is the women of Morrison's world that preserve the community ideal, suppress or express individuality to benefit the group, take in orphans, cure illness, and raise children single-handedly. It is a prtrait of the woman as culture-bearer, as the hidden strength of society. It a voice from the shadows of white patriarchal society; one of joy, love, and strength.

FOOTNOTES

1. Carl Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, trans. R. F. Hull (New York: Bollingen Foundation, Inc., 1959), p. 42.

2. Stanislav Grof, M.D., Realms of the Human Unconscious: Observations from LSD Research. (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976), pp. 162-3.

3. Wade Nobles, "Africanity: Its Role in Black Families," The Black Family: Essays and Studies, 2nd ed., 1978. Ed. Robert Staples (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1971), pp. 19-26.

4. Ralph H. Metcalfe, Jr., "The West African Roots of Afro-American Music," Contemporary Black Thought: The Best from the Black Scholar. Ed. Robert Chrisman and Nathan Hare (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973), pp. 26-40.

5. Eugene B. Redmond, "The Black American Epic: Its Roots, Its Writers," ibid., pp. 41-52.

6. Mel Watkins, "Talk with Toni Morrison," New York Times Book Review, Sept. 6, 1977, p. 48.

7. Redmond, "The Black American Epic,"p.47.

8. Watkins, "Talk with Toni Morrison," p. 50.

9. Geoffrey Parrinder, African Mythology (London: The Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1967), p. 92.

10. Ibid, pp. 128-30.

11. Redmond, "The Black American Epic," p. 42.

12."'Intimate Things in Place': A Conservation with Toni Morrison," Massachusetts Review, 18 (Autumn, 1977), p. 485.

13. Ellen Peck Killoh, "The Woman Writer and the Element of Destruction," College English, 34 (October 1972), 31

14. Grace Stewart, A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877-1977 (Vermont:Eden Press Women's Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 15.

15. "'Intimate Things in Place,'" p.476.

16. Toni Morrison, Sula (New York: Bantam, 1973),p. 105.

17. Nobles, "Africanity," p. 23.

18. Ibid., p. 20.

19. Ibid., pp. 21-22.

20. Ibid., p. 22.

21. Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 231.

22. Nobles, p. 22.

23. Ibid., p.24.

24. Ibid., p. 21.

25. Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), p.159.

26. Dominique Zahan, The Religion, Spirituality, and Thought of Traditional Africa, trans. Kate Ezra Martin and Lawrence M. Martin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 93.

27. Ibid., p. 94.

28. Ibid., p. 95.

29. Ibid., p. 117.

30. Parrinder, African Mythology, p. 67.

31. Ibid., p. 71.

32. Nor Hall, The Moon and the Virgin: Reflections of the Archetypal Femine (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 3.

33. Ibid., p. 5.

34. Isak Dinesen, Out of Africa, from ibid., p. 5.

35. Nor Hall, The Moon and the Virgin, p. 3.

36. Parrinder, Mythology, p. 67.

37. Ibid.

38. Zahan, Religion, p. 157.

39. Geoffrey Parrinder, African Traditional Religion (Westport, Conneticut: Greenwood Press, 1954), p. 113.

40. Ibid., p. 131.

41. Zahan, Religion, p. 93.

42. Mary Helen Washington, "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies," College English, Vol. 43, no. 1 (January 1981), pp. 1-11.

43. Washington, "New Lives," p. 6.

44. Zahan, Religion, p. 95.

45. Ibid., p. 97.

46. Ibid., p. 95.

47 Nor Hall, Moon and Virgin, p. 123.

48. Ibid., p. 11.

49. Ibid., p. 15.

50. Zahan, Religion, p. 101.

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