

# ***The Fluidity in Becoming Women: Being Both the Nightshade and Blackberry in Toni Morrison's Sula***

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**Abstract:** Female identity and female relationship are the cores of Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, as she declares in the forward "what is friendship between women when unmediated by men? What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community?" By creating troubled, or outlaw, women, Morrison challenges the binary thinking that women can either survive or perish depending on their subordination to males; instead, she argues women can be both evil and good by challenging the conventions scripted by patriarchy. Indeed, this empowerment originates and sustains itself from female relationships, like maternal relationships and womanly friendships. This article begins by employing Judith Butler's theory of performativity that gender is essence-lacking compelled social fiction, and then it pays particular attention to female characters and their intersected relationships. In this way, I argue that the troubled women in *Sula* provides alternative "theatre space" for females to practice peculiar performance, thus challenging the conventions set by patriarchy and finding the heterogeneous "me-ness." The article concludes that "becoming a woman" is fluid, not static. Because it is constantly shaped by their intermittent female relationships in the conditioned space, there is possibility for modulating the conventional gender roles embodied in the society.

**Keywords:** gender performativity, women studies, identity, *Sula*, Toni Morrison.

## **1. Introduction**

*Sula*, written by Toni Morrison and first published in 1973, is a book about "inversion" of female identity, deconstructing the binary of goodness and evil in judging women. To illustrate her inversion on female "me-ness," she frames *Sula* on the complicated female relationships to portray the contradictions, which are insinuated in the metaphors of "nightshade" and "blackberry" that both "have darkness in them," but one stands for poison while the other for nutrition [1]. It suggests her unique stance that becoming women is fluid and contradictory, echoing Judith Butler's theory of performativity that gender is a social fiction, lacking preceding essence which defines the goodness and evil women identity should conform to [2].

By questioning the essence-free in gender formation and by exploring how complicated female relationships mould both "evil and good" characteristics in *Sula* and *Nel*, this essay posits that "becoming a woman" is fluid, not static. Because it is constantly shaped by their intermittent female relationships in the conditioned space, there is possibility for modulating the conventional gender roles embodied in the community of Bottom, Medallion. In this essay, employing Judith Butler's

theory of performativity that gender is social construction, materialisation of historical and cultural embodiments, and disciplines gender to perform their roles like in a theatre, this paper argues the “troubled” females in Sula, like Eva, Hannah, Helene, and Ajax’s conjure mother, provide a certain kind of “theatre space” for Sula and Nel to practice peculiar, or outlaw, performance, thus challenging the conventions and thus finding the heterogeneous “me-ness.”

This essay explores the heterogenous conventions in two families (Peace and Wright), especially the matriarchal influence that breaks the traditional stage settings for actors, thus building a heterogeneous space empowering Sula and Nel to transcend the social expectation and to find the “me-ness” in practising their own scripts: being the nightshade and blackberry and merging into one. This paper is composed of two parts, with the first one exploring the theoretical framework, and second falling into five sections. The first two sections will analyse the matrilineal lines of Peace and Wright family; the third will wrestle with the sisterhood between Nel and Sula, exploring their merge and decouple; the fourth will focus on the tripartite relationship between Sula, Ajax, and Ajax’s mother; the last will return to Eva and the final conflation between Nel and Sula.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In the theory of performativity, Judith Butler claims that gender is a collective, compelled social fiction, lacking the essence that precedes any subjectivity of identity. She suggests “gender is no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts” [2]. Gender is understood to be an “illusion of an abiding gendered self” [2]. More, to sustain the power of body regulation, genders are disciplined, through stylisation and punishment, to perform their gender roles, which is rooted in the collective agreement that both the “audience” and “actors” perform their roles “in the mode of belief” [2]. Due to the lack of preceding essence, gender is, thus, free from any fundamentalist features and open to interpretation. Therefore, from a feminist perspective, Butler contends “one might try to reconceive the gendered body as the legacy of sedimented acts rather than a predetermined or foreclosed structure” [2]. In a word, the feminist task should attempt to reconcile the given gender role.

However, how could that work? Butler answers the question by comparing the social context to a theatre space. First, she points out the contingency in performance, “actors are always on the stage, within the terms of performance. Just as script may be enacted in various ways, and just as the play requires both text and interpretation, so the gendered body acts its part in a culturally restricted corporeal space and enacts interpretations within the confines of already existing directives” [2]. Once on stage, the actors do not passively accord to their scripts but add their interpretations to cultural codes. Second, she examines the conventions in different stage settings. It is the differences in conventions that offer space for actors to practice their playscripts with a certain amount of heterogeneity. To explain, like in watching a play, audience would feel normal and undisturbed while observing “transvestite,” (males are dressed in women’s clothes) simply because it is set acceptable in the theatre space [2]. Therefore, once people accept the preposition of “anomaly,” then any peculiar behaviours would become acceptable.

## **3. Body**

### **3.1. Helene and Nel: making the wonderful me**

Under the big hands of Helene Wright, Nel Wright is moulded to be an ideal community girl (“the girl became obedient and polite”) [3]. Since young, any personal space Nel wishes has been squeezed, with “any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” [3]. Helene bases her manipulation on punishment, forcing Nel

to act out her ideal female role. Disgust, for example, is the foundation on which her manipulation rests. She despises Nel's imperfect body, as "Nel's skin had dusk in it" and Nel inherits "the broad flat nose of Wiley [father] and his generous lips" [3]. She endeavours to reshape her body by constantly reminding Nel the need to "pull her nose" and instilling that smooth, straight hair is the norm, indifferent to Nel's spite and pain [3]. Butler argues the materialisation of gender is a combination of ritual, repetition, and punishment. Thus, in Helene's house with "oppressively neatness," Nel is repetitively stylized disciplined to perform the ideal community girl, to concretise the body written in her mother's playscript: to become obedient, physically appealing, and virtuous [3].

However, changing the space allows for challenging the boundaries of accepted conventions, empowering women to practice new gender performance. Once Helene loses her legitimacy of authority, Nel could resort to new-found scripts to play her female character. For example, Nel's epiphany of her individualism results from seeing the collapse of mother's image: from impressive, rectitude woman to a "custard" woman, in the train ride to New Orleans," where they encounter racism, during the "first time she was ever to leave Medallion" [3]. On the ride, Nel and Helene are interrogated by a white conductor for wandering through the white coach to the "Colored People" only coach, but Helene responds with no defence but only with a "dazzling, coquettish smile," demonstrating her weakness and fear [3]. Nel senses "these men ... were bubbling with a hatred for her mother," and then what unfolds in Nel's mind is a "custard," whose softness and fragility symbolize the vulnerability, cast in relief to Helene's previous impressiveness and authority, "the woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into the church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look" [3]. Helene becomes the "troubled" now, someone in Nel's eyes could be challenged and rebelled against; simultaneously, she feels "both pleased and shamed," ruminating that "If she were really Custard, that there was chance that Nel was too" [3]. Custard symbolizes finding a different version of the gender role granted with alternative lines and actions, echoing Butler's analogy of "transvestite," one way of inversion.

In this case, therefore, after returning home, Nel talks to herself, "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." and "I want . . . I want to be . . . wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful" [3]. Nel's repetition of "me" and the refusal of being their daughter or bearing the given name Nel—all shows she tries to stop being the "blackberry" but to be the "wonderful me." She is breaking the convention her mother has set for her, because she draws power from the first-time outside Medallion that brings Nel to another "theatre space," where the script is not written according to her mother's will, and where alternative behaviours are acceptable. It is this little space that Nel finds power to ignore her mother's "hands," to challenge the identity of "blackberry" and try to be a "wonderful me." This moment, Nel's fluidity of gender develops.

### 3.2. Eva, Helene, and Sula: Indifference to Intimacy and Savouring of the self

After the epiphany, Nel befriends Sula, as "her newfound me-ness gave her strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother" [3]. Then what is Sula like? Morrison describes Sula as a dangerous woman: "She is New World black and New World woman extracting choice from choiceless-ness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female" [1]. Arguably, Sula's female role should be understood through her coming of age under indifference underlying the matrilineal line. To see how Sula is moulded into rebellious, sexual-savouring, and dangerous, like the evil nightshade, first we need to get a glimpse of grandmother Eva Peace and mother Hannah Peace.

Eva casts a shadow on both Helene and Sula, turning them into indifferent women. First, Eva's way of survival is hatred, not tender love. Eva is a marginalized woman, with her trouble stemming

from the failed marriage and disability. After abandoned by her husband BoyBoy and cheating insurance through a train accident at the cost of one leg, “Happy or not, after BoyBoy’s visit she began to retreat her to her bedroom, leaving the bottom of the house more and more to those who lived there” [3]. Her fortress is different from any other residence in the community: “a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors” [3]. Nel likens it to a “woolly house,” which can absorb all the eccentricities [3]. Anything this house imbues is chaos, disorder, and undisciplined manner. It is in this disorderly space that Eva gains the authority to enjoy alienation.

Second, she resists marginalization by retraining her love to her families: being arrogant, prejudiced, surly, and spleenful to other women in the house. In chapter 1923, when Hannah chides Eva for if she ever has genuinely loved her children (“Mamma, did you ever love us?”), Eva’s response is nippy:

“Awww, Mamma? Awww, Mamma? 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.....What you Talkin ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or What is that between your ears, heifer?” [3].

The repetition of “Mamma” underlines Hannah’s expectation of maternal love, while obviously Eva’s understanding of maternal love is not accessible to ordinary people. Clearly, in this outrage, Eva’s understanding of love is to survive and give life to her children, and apart from that nothing else retains. Love is not the intimate Christian love with company, warmth, playfulness, and felicity that Hannah yearns for. Eva’s indifference whittles Hannah’s faith in attachment piece by piece, eventually leading up her disillusion in love. This moment sheds a light on why Hannah’s resorts to enjoying sexual pleasure and disregarding intimate relationships.

Hannah’s passionless pursuit of sexual freedom is riddled with her relationship with Eva. Just as Eva survives by hatred and indifference, Hannah shuts door upon to any man. “She rippled with sex” and “would fuck practically anything,” but all the affairs rarely leave footprints in the bedroom, where marriage is implied; instead, all took place in the cellar, pantry, against the shelves, on the flour sack, or in the parlour [3]. Being a “daylight lover” means shunning away from the gesture that connotes with “a measure of trust and definite commitment” [3]. Additionally, she jeopardizes other community women’s marriages, and she can destroy them without any guilt, “she could break a marriage before it had even become one” [3]. In these casual flings, Hannah seems “only happier,” showing her content comes from detachment from morals, again paralleling with Eva’s survival from alienation and hatred.

Interestingly, Hannah inspires Sula to realize the pleasure of enjoying sexual freedom. After witnessing Hannah’s “only happier” face, Sula “made up her own mind” [3]. foreshadowing her rebellious self-exploration in sexual freedom. In 1937, Sula returns to Bottom, and, like Hannah, dares the stability in community women’s marriage, “she would lay their husbands and then no more” [3]. However, Sula’s approach is more brutal and emotionless, for she “was trying them and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow” [3]. More specifically, in her first sexual intercourse with Ajax, Morrison repeats “pantry” as the erotic venue, “she... pulled him into the pantry...the gesture came to Hannah’s daughter naturally” [3]. As if it were to fulfil the wish of the little girl who gazes at her mother’s pleasure after bedding with a married man, Sula recreates her mother’s behaviour to complete the performance of a female character. Her wanton savouring (“seeing her seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent.”) becomes a ritual, the stylized repetition of the actions [3]. In so doing, Sula mimics her mother’s behaviour to complete the performance of a detached and immoral woman, materialising the historical embodiments for female identity in the Peace family.

In addition to refusing to become a wife, Hannah also frees herself from become the mother. It is another projection of Eva on Hannah's body and leaves trace on Sula. Hannah shuns away from giving unconditional motherly love, as she directly states, "I love Sula. I just don't like her" [3]. It echoes with Eva's cold-blood answer for motherlove "[n]ot the way you thinkin'" [3]. Inflicted, Sula dashes into the attic and becomes "aware of a sting in her eyes" and her call "floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight" [3]. The words "flying" and "float" suggest eagerness in escaping from the brutal reality. Also, metaphorically, "the sting" blurs her vision for future life. Since her vision is obstructed by her family relationship, she needs to untie the shackles, thus "flying" symbolically refers to her yearning for the unbound "me-ness." She needs to find another brighter sky for free galloping; therefore, the "bright, hot daylight" is a symbol of Sula's leaving home and looking for a new space to play her rebellious female character.

It is worth noticing that the imagery of "bright, hot daylight" repetitively unwinds in Sula's eyes. The moment Hannah dances in the burring flames in the backyard, Sula just "stood on the back porch just looking" [3]. Her inaction and cruelty are only detected by Eva, who is keen of the family's inherited withdrawal from intimate relationships to such an extent that even death could be blind to. Eva's conviction that Sula only watched "because she was interested" suggests what her mother's suffering death renders her is "brightness" [3]. Again, burning flames becomes another "bright, hot daylight," the means by which Sula could savour freedom in an innocent way. There is, in this light, a simulation in Sula's actions, her way of imitating her mother's indifference and hence draws power for self-expression.

"However, this longing is far from not subject to conflict. Take Sula's first confrontation with Eva after returning home.

'Well, don't let your mouth start nothing that your ass can't stand. When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you.'

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

'Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man.'

'You did.'

'Not by choice.'

'Mamma did'" [3].

Two scripts are standing in opposition: The traditional expectations for women in Bottom are at odds with Sula's practices representing modern New World. Interestingly, Sula contradicts Eva by pointing out the double-standards ("You did," "Mamma did.") in her doctrines ("to get married... have babies) [3]. The more she repeats the inconsistency, the more she emphasizes the justification for practicing her freedom in women's choice. Essentially, Sula's counterattack advocates that gender itself has no inherent preceding essence but is confined in the intermittent female relationships and, more, can be modulated by manoeuvring the playscript added with new interpretations. Gender roles are not fixed, but fluid. In Sula's request "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself," she justifies the women's individual voice [3]. On Sula's stage, the protagonist can be solely herself, and she is entitled to convert from the poisonous "nightshade" into a nourishing, flourishing "blackberry."

With above discussed, matriarchal relationship of the Peace family has had a profound impact on shaping Sula's female role—longing for rebellion, enjoying sexual pleasure and achieving self-affirmation—to live an experimental, dangerous life. As Barbara Christian maintains, "the Peace women are convoluted, marvelous folk. As portrayals of black women, they are as complex and non-stereotypical as any you will find in literature. Only such ancestral vitality and complexity could have produced Sula, as undefinable as she is black, as unique as she is a woman" [4]. Her uniqueness is rooted the family's indifference (or the refusal to intimacy), "Sula was distinctly different. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her [Sula] and, with a twist that was all her own

imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full rein... hers was an experimental life" [3]. Morrison describes Sula via her "resistance to either sacrifice or accommodation"; she is a "dangerous female," one who attempt to reconcile with the given role in the disorderly theatre space of 7 Carpenter Road [3]. While Morrison depicts it is a choice "without centre nor reliance, not even ego," at least she exists as "a special kind of black person woman, one with choices" [1].

### 3.3. Nel and Sula: becoming the nightshade and blackberry as one

This section must be in one column. Butler argues that the "body is a materiality that bears meaning," and the way to carry out historical embodiments is "dramatic:" for it is a "continual and incessant" process to concretise other possibilities and perform one's body distinctly from either "contemporaries" or those "embodied predecessors and successors" [2]. By merging two into one, a new process to "concretise other possibilities," Sula and Nel attempt to discover the new "me-ness," as Marie Nigro claims "the girls grow into womanhood clinging to each other, each providing what the other lacks in herself" [5]. Thereby, they could be both the nightshade and blackberry simultaneously. Their "becoming women" is imbued in fluidity. The following section explains this gender performance in three aspects: publicly gazing back males, creatively exploring sexual experience, and prioritising female friendships over marriage.

In the shared belief for questing for the "wonderful me" and "bright, hot daylight," Sula and Nel begin to stare back at male gaze to find the new "me-ness." For example, they openly play out the sexual beauty of their bodies in the "appraising stares" and "panther eyes" of males, such as uncovering their "stalk like legs," wishbone thin," and moving "like tightrope walkers" [3]. For Sula, this coquettish behaviour is particularly portrayed in her pleasure in hearing Ajax's comment "Pig meat," even though they "guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight."—this mere concealment serves as a foil to her deep yearning for sexual admiration [3]. More, another way to strike back male gaze is to develop the female gaze. For instance, at the age of twelve, "the beautiful, beautiful boys" and "shiny wet backs," they lay eyes on are compared to the glittering "jewels" that "dotted the landscape" [3]. That Sula and Nel peek into boys swimming naked in rivers in public and flirt with the "panther eyes" by sensuously performing their femininity becomes the way to materialise their consensus on the new "me-ness."

Just winning the male admiration does not suffice, but they need to integrate with each other to experience sex. "Adolescence for Nel and Sula is marked not only by individuation, but by merger, as a single, provocative play scene illustrates" [6]. They proceed to touch each other's bodies: "They lay in the grass, their foreheads almost touching" [3]. Especially in their collaboration, "together they worked until the two holes were one and the same," Morrison compares "hole" to the womb, symbolizing Sula and Nel's merging two holes into their unique way to explore the function of sexual organ, which no longer serves men but only pleases the women [3]. Meanwhile, the becoming of "the same" implies they intend to merge as one body, being both the blackberry and nightshade simultaneously. Jan Furman sustains "in their symbolic sexual play, Nel and Sula have absolute control in this necessary rite of passage (without the intrusion of a masculine presence) which conjoins them until, like the holes, they are one and the same" [6]. The becoming of "the same" implies Nel and Sula are performing their roles, by wielding the sexual organ creatively merely for the self-confirmed "me-ness."

Most importantly, due to the merge, Nel's marriage is doomed to fall apart, but the collapse is not evil. On the surface, people might be inclined to moral judgment, reproaching Sula for sabotaging Nel's marriage and betraying the friendship,

"She ... said softly, 'We were friends.'

'Oh, yes. Good friends,' Sula said.



‘And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.’

‘What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?’” [3].

Nevertheless, the conflict lies in their different priorities for sisterhood and marriage. Nel has already betrayed sisterhood when she marries Jude, as she regards it “greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” [3]. Sula, on the other hand, has long held that female relationship is stronger than the male one: friendships between women should be unmediated by men. Therefore, when she sabotages the union, she is, as a matter of fact, re-affirming the priority of friendship over marriage, upholding the integrity of “merge-as-one” female role. Borrowing Christian’s words, it is arguably her sabotage is like “an exploratory act, ... as a means to more intimacy with Nel.” Sula is trying to share her “experimental knowledge with her,” undermining Nel’s illusion for her life base that marriage should be put above friendships [4]. Therefore, she declares the affairs innocent and non-evil (“If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?”) [3]. Given this, if Morrison intends to engage readers into the moral trial, it would be, however, contrary to her breaking the binary ethics of either “evil” or “good.” In fact, she is merging “evil” with “good.” In Morrison’s depiction of the breach in friendship, it further expounds gender performance rooted in female relations could break the convention: being a woman unmediated by men can be fluid and interchangeable.

### 3.3.1. Nel and Sula: becoming the nightshade and blackberry as one

Admittedly, some readers, in finding Nel finally chooses to marry Jude Greene and becomes the benevolent wife and nourishing mother, might raise doubt. They might question is Nel’s sudden change challenging Butler’s view that gender role lacks any preceding essence, or the fundamental norms, in certain behaviours and choices? As Nel’s choice fully conforms to the conventional moral code, such as abiding by the will of mothers and assuming the responsibility of raising children in the community, it is more like affirming an essentialism. Does this mean that Butler’s feminist task to reconcile with the given role is just a kind of fantasy that cannot be fulfilled in reality?

Indeed, it is easy for readers to feel frustrated on the surface, but they need to consider the differences in physical and emotional space where Nel and Sula are nurtured. The degree of force to which gender is disciplined varies in two environments, thus bearing dissimilar results. For example, for Nel, the new-found “me-ness” stems from “the last time she was ever to leave Medallion”, while Sula steps out to the outside world for near a decade [3]. Sula’s mother has passed away, and her grandmother is estranged, so it is allowed that she could be detached from her family. Nel, by contrast, continues to be bound by Helene’s ritual, enclosed in her mother’s oppressively neat house, deprived of any space to escape.

Nel is constantly shaped by her mother’s big hand, leading up to that “her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” [3]. Nel is confined to her mother’s “incredibly orderly house” and could not escape. In addition, to counteract Sula, she claims that “sameness and forever” is a source of pain, saying “hell ain’t things lasting forever. Hell is change” [3]. After all, she attains the sense of stability and security in her mother’s relationship and in her marriage. I will not argue that once Nel tries to be a “wonderful me,” then she could realize her idea; I am arguing that being a woman is conditioned by the time and space continuously, but that’s not denying any chance for breaking the rules. It is these entanglements, the twist and turn, back and forth, in intermittent female relationships that shed light on how gender performance is a fluid, multifaceted process. That is, becoming a woman is a flexible, rather than static, and it is constantly modulated by their female relations in different space.

### 3.4. Sula, Ajax, and Ajax's mother: the yearning for the flight and free fall

The second place where readers may disagree is Sula's death. If the gender role could sustain its power through history by stylized replication, leaving the script for others to continue performing their roles, then does Sula's death, which means the elimination for embodiments, indicate that Butler's feminist task to reconcile with the given role is again a fantasy, featuring as experimental and lacking material entities to be reconciled with reality? To rebut, firstly Sula's death needs to be understood in the context of a mirror-like female relationship between Sula and Ajax's mother, and second there is a need to distinguish two deaths: the death without choice and the one initiatively embracing "free down fall" [3].

Ajax's mother has an invisible mirror relationship with Sula. The reason Ajax chose Sula is that "other than his mother, he had never met an interesting woman in his life" [3]. Ajax's mother is an "evil conjure woman" bearing seven children who brings an assortment of items [3]. The integration of disorganized items is very similar to the "woolly house" led by Eva, where Sula spent time "galloping through her mind on a grey-and-white horse tasting sugar and coupled roses" [3]. The chaotic space means the disappearance of constraints, where women can fly freely and perform their roles according to their imagination. In this light, Ajax is intrigued by Sula's desire for freedom. Sula, unlike those community women trying to possess him, was the only female who "knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently" [3]. Furman contends "as characters in flight, both Ajax and Sula stand in opposition to the community that is firmly rooted in ritual and tradition" [6]. However, tracing the lineage, we could understand that resemblance returns to the mirror between Sula and Ajax's mother.

Nevertheless, once Sula started "nailing him down," Ajax broke up with Sula and left for good. Furman argues, "Ajax does leave Sula, but his action is not betrayal [3]. Ajax and Sula had come together, not as fractional individuals in need of the other to be complete, but as whole people, and when the equation is threatened by Sula's possessiveness, Ajax leaves Dayton and airplanes" [6]. By juxtaposing Ajax's departure with his mother's mirror relationship, his betrayal means giving Sula the opportunity to become the one he believes Sula should have been, a "brilliant woman," identical to her mother. His departure is to continue refusing "babying or protecting her" [3]. His departure endeavours to allow Sula to maintain "both tough and wise" [3]. His departure attempts to render her space to stand by her ideal that "I want to make myself." and that "her life was her own" [3]. Morrison comments, "they are the misunderstood people in the world. There is a wildness that they have, a nice wildness... It's pre-Christ in the best sense. It's Eve" [7]. If it is put that Ajax's mother, Ajax, and Sula are all "misunderstood," then the death of Sula would not be equivalent to the death of collective belief, nor mark the end of repetition in gendered actions, because Ajax's mother has fostered at least six other Ajax-alike brothers, and Ajax leaves Dayton, continuing to look for his plane under the "bright, hot daylight."

Furthermore, Sula's death is not a one without choice, for at least she enjoys the solitude in "free fall to death." Her crying out before death, "Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world," poses her stand in refusing to confuse her death with other people's self-less decease; more, when she hollers to Nel, "My lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's... A second-hand lonely," she completely inverts the meaning of death, which is not a resigned compromise, but a way of claiming independence and free will [3]. Furman writes, "Imperfect as she is, however, Sula does escape the falseness and emptiness of Nel's life. Even her being profoundly solitude and losing life is a way of being her own way of playing her role, completely private to herself. Other women, including Nel, are like spiders, who are circumscribed to the dangling 'in the dark dry places...terrified of the free fall' [6].



In contrast in other women, Sula stands firmly for the galloping under the “bright, hot daylight,” all symbolizing freedom. “She is not afraid to use her wings fully to ‘surrender to the downward flight. She is unafraid of the free fall” [6]. Eventually, Morrison delineates Sula’s pure and sincere death associated with the “rain scent” that washes away her “tired flesh” full of sins, a ritual of baptism that metaphorically refers to the new-born [3].

For Sula, even death is means by which she explores the “me-ness” and reconciles with the given gender role. Her death belongs to her performance of an initiative self, like Carmean asserts,

“Sula is consequently more intimate with herself than is ordinary true of others, more knowledgeable about herself, more attuned to her needs and desires. In the end, this inner intimacy, far from being evil, assumes a purity, signified by her association with ‘rain” [8].

In summary, abandonment, loneliness, and death all reverse the meaning of prescribed meaning in language, opening new interpretations. Again, Morrison breaks binary, dares the reader to imagine the complexity and fluidity of “reconcile with the given roles “and “becoming women.” Although death is the end, Sula has left her traces on other people, including Nel and Ajax, whose survival is another possibility of materialised embodiment.

### 3.5. Nel and Sula: the merged one without the body

Nel’s female characteristics after Sula’s death have strong traces of Sula. Within the 24 years (from 1941 to 1965) since Sula’s death, Nel’s attitude toward marriage and family has become increasingly identical to Sula’s: she keeps a distance from intimacy and remains faithful to herself. She embarked on working and living independently, as “she spent little time trying to marry again” [3]. She raises her child as a single parent and love her child in a different way, “it was a love that, like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off” [3]. The simile of the hardness in scraping off “pan of syrup” infers that emotional attachment shifts from liquid to solid: it is hardened in time, but also unchanged with years passing by. The hardness symbolizes the unremitting unconditional love ceases in the history, which allows for the possibility in fluidity of maternal love. Resembling Sula, or like Eva, Nel comes to believe maternal love has an ending point, no longer the eternal commitment she should devote her total self to.

The merging of Nel and Sula is also skillfully established in the episode where Eva mistook Nel for Sula. Finally, while Eva tells Nel that it is Plum who saw Sula accidentally killed Chicken Little by loosening her hand at a river, she accuses her of guilt and meanwhile mistakes her for Sula, “Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you.... Sula?” [3]. In Eva’s mind, it is no less evil for Nel to just “watch” the death and sit by it, so in this lens, the two girls are one figure—Nel is not only nourishing blackberry but also poisonous nightshade. What’s more, Eva’s misunderstanding obscures the fundamental basis that gender needs a specific body to lie on: Sula can be Nel, while Nel can also be Sula. Combing the concluding epiphany from Nel, “We was girls together... O Lord, Sula... girl, girl, girlgirlgirl,” their gender roles do not need a language-given name or a specific body, but rather becoming a girl only needs to be perceived behaviorally [3]. Bergeholtz, Rita A argues “beginning with the ‘nigger joke,’ Morrison reminds us that there is no proper meaning inherent in words or names...only meanings we assign to people and events in our attempts to establish the limits of reality” [9]. Morrison’s tactful combination of two names by challenging the limitations of names provides further evidence to the idea that gender performance has no essence but is limited to social construction and is only expressed in action. In the integration of Sula and Nel, it is clear that female identity can be fluid and contradictory, far from a univocal fundamental definition.

## 4. Conclusions

To answer the question of what the depiction of the female relationships in *Sula* suggests about Toni Morrison's stance towards the performativity in gender construction and the possibility for eliminating the conventional gender roles embodied in Bottom, this essay argues that Sula and Nel's relationships to the troubled women enable them to challenge the fundamentals and thereby imputing new scripts into practicing the "self" as females.

To elaborate, this paper draws from Judith Butler's theory of performativity and develops by analyzing the matrilineal influence among female characters (including Helene, Eva, Hannah, Nel, Sula, and Ajax's mother). Essentially, transcending different space allows characters to find heterogeneity in practicing their given gender roles: Sula tries to find the "wonderful me" after seeing Eva's vulnerability in encountering racism; Sula yearns for "bright, hot daylight" after experiencing Eva's indifference and Hannah's downfall; Sula and Nel attempt to merge as one, being the nutritional blackberry and poisonous nightshade at the same time, to break the binary expectation imposed on women that they either could be good or evil; Sula's initiative free fall symbolizes her "me-ness", paralleling Ajax's mother's decision for controlling one's own fate and defining her choice for death in a proud manner; and finally, in Eva's eyes, Nel is mistaken as Sula, which finishes the two-in-one merge and erases the need for material essence in bearing the gender roles that need nothing but the gendered performance. In conclusion, "becoming a woman" is fluid, not static; it is constantly shaped by their intermittent female relations in the conditioned space.

The distinct way Morrison wrestles with the contradictions in becoming women deserves the attention. Reading *Sula* challenges readers to reflect on the binary thinking of judging female identity and more renders them freedom for imaging the subjectivity in becoming women. It involves both self-reflection and self-empowerment, as Karen Carmean comments, "our conventional expectations, after all, have been challenged...By the end, we are prone to have given up any dualistic thinking in favor of the fluid, multiple process Morrison's novel gives us" [8]. Last, this unconventional narrative of "inversion" of female identity could be explained in Morrison's own words for honoring *Sula*'s idiosyncrasy, "I always thought that *Sula* was the best idea I ever had" [10].

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