

Beyond Boundaries:
Female Friendship in *Passing* and *Sula*

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For the women who continue to bond, create, and rebel.

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Introduction

With the increased production of African American women's writing within the last three decades, the nature of female friendships in the African American novel has caused a critical debate. Literary discourse creates various interpretations of the relationships between women. Critics seem preoccupied with identifying the intimacy of these friendships with sexual labels: heterosexual or lesbian desire. This phenomenon is most apparent in criticism of the texts *Passing* by Nella Larsen (1928) and *Sula* by Toni Morrison (1973). Both novels focus on a relationship between two African American women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry and Nel Wright and Sula Peace respectively. In addition, both novels are set within the 1920s (although *Sula* actually progresses into the 1960s) and address female characters' struggle with sexual identity, class strivings, and social alienation. Despite the heterosexual relationships of each woman, African American feminist critics Barbara Smith, Debra McDowell, and Barbara Johnson associate both novels with the homo-erotic. Yet, the novels' association with lesbianism has not been uniform despite the numerous similarities the novels share. The critics identify each novel's friendship as lesbian for diverse reasons in order to explain the intensity of the same-sex relationship. Unfortunately, as African American criticism develops different theories for the latent homosexuality within *Sula* and *Passing*, the concept of female friendship becomes confused, contradictory, and confined.

One of the earliest critics to address the concept of female sexuality in African American women's literature is an article entitled "Toward A Black Feminist Criticism" by Barbara Smith. Smith identifies the African American female's place in literature and society as distinct from both the African American male and the white woman, who do

not share in the black woman's double oppression. Smith writes that the "Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are in the 'real world' of white and/or male consciousness beneath consideration, invisible, unknown" (15). African American women's subjugation is not understood or articulated by men or white women. Smith explains that black women are rendered "invisible" because they have no political movement of their own. As a result, they are ignored in various arenas including literature. Smith provides examples in which both white and African American male critics and white feminists ignore the sexual and racial politics, respectively, of African American woman's novels such as Alice Walker's *In Love & Trouble: Stories of Black Women*, Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Toni Morrison's *Sula*.

Furthermore, Smith believes she can identify African American women's novels as lesbian texts because both African Americans and lesbians share similar experiences of invisibility. She bases her definition of lesbian texts on Bertha Harris' article "Lesbians and Literature." Within Harris' work, Smith creates a definition for a lesbian text and concludes that "if in a woman writer's work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and if there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature" (164). Smith explains that lesbian and African American women's text function outside social and literary standards. She goes on to write, "Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives" (Smith 165). Therefore, a text is not lesbian because the female characters are actually lovers, but because of the unusual significance placed on the female friendship. According to Smith,

a lesbian relationship is signified by the passion between the women as well as the failure of each woman's heterosexual relationship. Thus, the girls' sexual discovery in each other's presence and Sula's independence from her community authenticate the texts innate lesbianism because they reveal African American women's autonomy and existence outside the white patriarchal society.

Interestingly, *Passing* is identified by Deborah McDowell as homo-erotic for completely different reasons. Whereas Smith focuses on the non-sexual interaction between two women and each woman's relationship with others (their interaction with men and the community), McDowell identifies latent sexual desire between two female protagonists within her introduction to the 1986 publication of *Quicksand and Passing*. McDowell believes that readers are led astray from the homo-eroticism in the text by the novel's epigraph, the poem "Heritage" by Countee Cullen. The poem's images of blackness and questions about ancestry suggest that the novel will address the same concerns. However, McDowell reveals, "Though superficially, Irene's is an account of Clare's passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene's awakening desire for Clare" (xxvi). She suggests that Irene's lesbian desires are obscured by the novel's issues of racial identity. McDowell claims that the homo-eroticism is evident in the characters' spatial relationship; as the women get physically closer they get erotically closer. In addition, McDowell finds sexual imagery, such as envelopes (a metaphor for the vagina) and fire, throughout the text as indicators of Irene's same sex desire.

Furthermore, McDowell states that Larsen consciously creates Irene's homosexual desire and skillfully hides it within the text. McDowell argues that the lesbian relationship is too dangerous to directly express; consequently, other critics do not identify the homo-eroticism because it is obscured in writing techniques.

Larsen's clever narrative strategies almost conceal it. In *Passing* she uses a technique found commonly in narratives by Afro-American and women novelists with a "dangerous" story to tell: "safe" themes, plots, and conventions are used as the protective cover underneath which lie more dangerous subplots. Larsen envelops the subplot of Irene's developing if unnamed and unacknowledged desire for Clare in the safe and familiar plot of racial passing. (xxx)

McDowell's focus on Larsen's intentions echoes Smith's idea of *Sula* working as a lesbian text. Yet, instead of characters rebelling, McDowell suggests that Larsen is the iconoclast. McDowell believes that the novel's title functions on multiple levels. On one hand, Clare is obviously passing for white. On the other hand, Irene is passing her attraction for Clare as platonic friendship. Furthermore, McDowell insinuates that Larsen's fiction is passing as a racial identity story instead of a homo-erotic tale.

Finally, Barbara Johnson evaluates both novels and their possible homo-erotic friendships in her article "Lesbian Spectacles: Reading *Sula*, *Passing*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *The Accused*." Johnson introduces a third criteria for identifying the homo-erotic in female relationships. Despite the intensity displayed in the friendships within both novels, Johnson claims that *Passing* exhibits homo-eroticism while *Sula* does not.

It is erotic to me that Irene's "no" constantly becomes a yes. The relationship is therefore overinvested and underexplained. This is what creates the effect of irresistible magnetism that is precisely not grounded in friendship or esteem. In *Sula*, on the other hand, while the relationship is certainly overinvested, it is also abundantly explained. My identifying signs of a lesbian structure, then, involved protracted and intense eye contact and involuntary re-encounters ungrounded in conscious positive feelings. (Johnson 162)

Johnson labels Irene's attraction to Clare as homo-erotic because she cannot discover the motives behind Irene's actions. Therefore, the friendship is homo-erotic because its structure is not clearly defined. Johnson argues that Sula and Nel's friendship is not homo-erotic because the texts provides several explanations as to why they establish their friendship. For Johnson, lesbianism is not defined by the actions of the characters—for each friendship is overinvested. Instead, Johnson defines lesbianism by her and other critic's inability to understand the nature of the friendship.

All three critics, Smith, McDowell, and Johnson, differ on their interpretation of the novel, and each theory is flawed by their broad and ambiguous definition of lesbianism. Although Smith defines lesbian writing, she does not identify a lesbian relationship in *Sula*. Alisha Coleman addresses Smith's vague and perhaps inaccurate use of the term lesbian in her article "One and One Make One: A Metacritical and Psychoanalytical Reading of Friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula*." Coleman writes:

a work that contains women as "central figures" in "passionate," "pivotal" relationships is a feminist work in that it focuses on women. But this

focus does not necessarily make it a lesbian work. Perhaps the confusion arises because Smith does not define the term “lesbian.” I think that the ultimate basis of a lesbian relationship or mode of thought is one woman’s sexual attraction for another. (145)

Coleman clearly defines lesbianism as sexual desire. Since Smith does not identify Sula and Nel’s friendship as sexual and does not create a new definition for lesbian, it is difficult to affirm *Sula* as a lesbian novel based on Smith’s theory based on central female characters. The text may be analogous to lesbian writing because of the similar oppression inherent in African American’s, women’s, and lesbian’s experiences, but as Coleman accurately distinguishes, the text is not lesbian based in sexual terms. If Smith believes that African American feminist criticism is distinct, Coleman argues, “then it should follow that lesbian criticism must also be separated from black feminist criticism and thus be recognized in its own right” (146). When Smith labels *Sula* as homo-erotic, she not only limits the boundaries of friendship, but she also ignores the significance of a true lesbian text. Smith does critical injustice to *Sula* and lesbian criticism when she does not define lesbian writing by a character’s sexual orientation.

Similarly, McDowell’s argument about the implicit sexual language is amiss because of inaccurate terminology. Granted, there is a latent desire present in *Passing*; Irene and Clare share an intensely emotional friendship. However, McDowell fails to distinguish between a desire for someone and a desire to be someone. The first defines a sexual attraction for an individual, which McDowell believes is explicitly seen within the text. The latter refers to an identification with someone that an attraction towards an individual. McDowell mistakes characters’ desire to define themselves for a sexual

desire. For example, McDowell refers to Irene's marital celibacy as proof of Irene's same-sex desire instead of a manifestation of Irene's middle-class morals on sexuality. Furthermore, McDowell focuses solely on Irene and fails to address Clare's possible reciprocal homo-erotic feelings despite the fact that Clare is the one who repeatedly initiates contact with Irene. Clare's unacknowledged behaviors makes McDowell's argument unbalanced.

Likewise, Johnson only analyzes Irene's supposed lesbian attraction for Clare. In addition, she dangerously imposes rigid restrictions on female friendship. Eye contact and uncomfortable situations become signs of lesbianism although the visual and character tension are usual passing plot devices. Johnson identifies the emotional investment, but she ignores the complexities that make the foundation of the friendship in *Passing* intricate and yet explainable. As she focuses on a latent same-sex desire she cannot easily demonstrate, she ignores the obvious social structures, like class and race, that would clarify Irene and Clare's over-invested relationship.

As a result, I will argue in this thesis that female friendship is beyond labels of sexuality. Each critic has attempted to label the relationship between Irene and Clare and Nel and Sula as heterosexual or homosexual, one or the other. However, the female friendship is neither, and its intimacy becomes reduced when it is labeled and viewed in terms of sexual desire. Although sexuality is inherently part of female identity, sexuality should not become the only basis for classifying the relationships between women. Female friendships become the site of interaction and struggle for many issues of the African American woman and an environment in which women define themselves. These issues will be addressed in the following chapters:

Chapter one, "Social Nurturing: Class and the Female Legacy," examines the environments and backgrounds that help establish the friendship in each novel. Each woman's sexual identity is shaped by the interaction of her class status and her female heritage. In *Passing*, class becomes the tie that binds Irene's and Clare's friendship, while in *Sula* Nel's and Sula's relationship is influenced by their maternal role models. The influence of class and female legacy creates the attraction between the women on which their friendship is based.

Chapter two, "Desire for or Desire to be: Feminine Intimacy and Heterosexual Relations," defines the female friendship and compares it to the sexual relationships the women have with significant male characters. Friendship is a safe environment in which each woman can define herself. Yet, the female friend is also someone from which each woman must distinguish herself. Relationships with men allow women to create this distinct identity outside of their friendship. The female friendship and the heterosexual relationship do not substitute for each other. Although the two relationships are different, they compliment one another.

My last chapter will be devoted to the conclusion I draw from the analysis in these two chapters. The complexities of each chapter moves beyond the two-fold system of sexuality. Female friendship is neither inherently lesbian nor needs to be defined as "heterosexual." Instead a fluid theory of female intimacy is necessary to avoid implications of deviancy or normalcy, oppression or privilege, rebellion or traditionalist, but embraces the intricacies that occur when women attempt to define themselves amongst other women.

Social Nurturing: Class and the Female Legacy

The social structure of class and the familial structure of maternal lineage are subtly, yet intricately woven together to form a delicate site of creation for the African American female sexual identity. Class stratification works simultaneously as a unifier and a discriminator for the African American community. Social status helps to form and identify a black bourgeoisie while separating this middle-class consciousness from what becomes a working-class social “burden.” Similarly, the maternal influence also functions through paradoxical means. Psychoanalysis reveals that the female protagonist must identify with her mother yet emerge from her child development with an autonomous identity. The female legacy creates a maternal bond yet also separates mother and child. Within *Passing* and *Sula*, class and female legacy work concurrently to shape binary sexual identities in each novel—the sexually expressive and repressed. The interaction between these dual identities will determine a complex desire for identity that will be developed later the following chapter. This chapter will focus on the influences that shape that desire: the social and familial structures. Specifically, class and female legacy interact as foreground and background; one becomes the site in which the other implicitly functions. Within *Passing*, class is the major determinant of the characters’ sexual identities and actually fosters a female legacy. On the contrary, *Sula*’s sexual development is established by the text’s female legacy, which becomes the place where class issues arise. The significance of class and female legacy vary from activity to passivity; they work together to form the novels’ female friendship.

As mentioned, *Passing* primarily focuses its attention on the class of its characters versus their familial legacy. Therefore, the novel provides very brief character histories.

The character backgrounds are revealed in Irene Redfield's recollections as she reads a letter from her old friend Clare Kendry. Although short, Irene's memories clearly distinguish the two women by class status. Irene comes from a middle-class family. Her father is a successful college graduate, and it is assumed that she and her brothers will also attain his socio-economic status. In contrast, Clare grows up in a working class family. Although her father is a college graduate, somehow he only becomes a janitor and an alcoholic. When he dies, Clare is left orphaned and at the mercy of two estranged aunts. Since the novel provides little detailed information about the childhood of each woman, their class affiliation becomes the means by which their identity becomes defined.

Larsen's novel is set during the rise of an African American middle class. Economic success, education, and regional origins become significant influences that stratify the African American community during the 1920s. Although white Americans historically held inferior opinions of blacks, which justified years of oppression, their image of blacks became important to members of the black community as blacks began to economically distinguish themselves from one another. Middle-class African Americans did not want to be associated with what they deemed the uncouth lower class. As a result, certain behaviors, morals, and appearances become stereotypically associated with specific classes. Shane White documents this trend in African American history in *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*.

It was not only whites who were offended by displays of "extravagant" attire. No matter how ridiculous or unfair such attitudes may have been, the behavior of individual blacks was all too easily taken, by whites at least,

to reflect on all African Americans. Partly, for this reason, middle-class blacks and members of the elite were keen to distance themselves from the dress and demeanor of ordinary African Americans and, at the same time, to curb what they viewed as the sartorial and Kinseki excess of those they saw as social inferiors (White 220)

The black bourgeoisie's social superiority allows them to differentiate themselves from the black working class as well as impose standards on that "lower" class. Subsequently, the black middle-class becomes associated with repression since it constructs its identity by controlling who it labels as social inferiors, and the black working class becomes generally associated with uninhibited expression because its lack of propriety must be controlled.

These images of expression and repression are exhibited in the personalities of Clare and Irene, respectively. These emotional states become the foundation for each woman's sexual identity and are clearly established from the beginning. When the novel opens, Irene is gazing upon a letter from Clare in her morning mail.

After her other ordinary and clearly directed letters the long envelope of thin Italian paper with its almost *illegible scrawl* seemed out of place and *alien*. And there was, too, something *mysterious* and lightly *furtive* about it. A *thin sly thing* which bore not return address...Some two years ago she had one very like it in outward appearance. *Furtive*, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little *flaunting*. Purple ink. Foreign paper of *extraordinary size*. (143 italics mine)

With the power of narration, Irene is able to control readers' image of Clare.

Immediately, Clare is identified as an uninhibited woman by the manner in which Irene describes the letter. Claudia Tate identifies the letter as a narrative device in her article "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation." Tate writes that "the letter ...objectifies abstract aspects of Clare's character, and its very presence reflects her daring defiance of unwritten codes of social propriety" (144). Although Larsen has ultimate power of authorship, it is important to note that Irene also has authorial power. Both Larsen and Irene use the narrative device; Clare's letter becomes symbolic of Clare's character. The envelope's alien and mysterious presence creates an exotic aura around the letter and its author. The sensuality of the letter mirrors Irene's class based opinion of Clare's unacceptable hypersexuality: the illegible writing suggests passion, its slyness insinuates immorality, the flaunting air reveals a contemptuousness, and its extraordinary size implies excessiveness.

As the narrator, Irene actively describes Clare, and she is passively defined in return. In accordance with her repressed identity, Irene's sexual character is revealed by her hesitation towards opening the letter.

Her brows came together in a tiny frown...She was wholly unable to comprehend such an attitude towards danger as she was sure the letter's contents would reveal; and she disliked the idea of opening it and reading it. This, she reflected, was of a piece with all she knew of Clare Kendry. Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside. Certainly not because of any alarms or feeling of outrage on the part of others. (Larsen 143)

Although this excerpt centers around Clare, Irene's character is being shaped. Her judgement of Clare's recklessness reveals her own middle class prudence. Irene reveals her class consciousness when she criticizes Clare for not considering others. In addition, within this critique is a hint of fearfulness or the idea of Clare as a sexual threat. As part of the black bourgeoisie, Irene is compelled to judge and control working class' licentiousness. Irene executes this control through narration. Yet, despite her power, she is unable to define herself except in relation to Clare. Like the bourgeoisie, Irene's identity is shaped by the working class, or Clare's identity. Even as the authorial voice, her compulsion to control affects her own self-presentation and identifies her class affiliation.

After Irene establishes their present sexual identities, she reflects upon the influence of Clare's class status. Irene recalls that, even in childhood, Clare shows no emotional restraint.

There had been, even in those days, nothing sacrificial in Clare Kendry's idea of life, no allegiance beyond her own immediate desire. She was selfish, and cold, and hard. And yet she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes almost on theatrical heroics. (Larsen 144)

Irene describes Clare as a woman of extremes; her desires have no boundaries. Clare's working class status allows her to be both alienating and inviting, making her a dramatic whirlwind. In contrast, Irene's repressed middle-class identity permits only rigid emotional responses. While remembering Clare's pain after her father's death, Irene must restrict her own emerging emotions. Irene recalls "how savagely [Clare] had

clawed those boys the day they had hooted her parent and sung a derisive rhyme, of their own composing, which pointed out certain eccentricities in his careening gait! And how deliberately she had—" (Larsen 145). The punctuation reveals Irene's empathetic reaction to the scene, instead of Clare's response. The exclamation point represents Irene's building emotion while the dash symbolizes the damming of that passion. After the dash, the text states "Irene brought her thoughts back to the present..." (Larsen 145). Irene no longer reflects on Clare's painful experience. Instead the text reflects on Irene's reaction to that experience so that she can repress her emotion.

Like the middle-class blacks to which White refers, Irene does not only restrict herself, but she also polices Clare's behaviors. The black bourgeois compulsion to guard the female sexual identity creates a unique community or legacy amongst African American women. This complex female legacy is very influential for the women in *Passing* because of the absence of mothers in the novel. Thadious M. Davis comments on Irene's and Clare's missing mothers in his biography of Larsen entitled *Nella Larsen, A Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*. Davis suggests that the characters' difficulty with motherhood is a result of their own absent mothers. "Indeed it appears that in an unspecified way, each daughter is responding to a lack of intimacy with a distant mother by inventing for herself a way to be maternal" (Davis 318). Although Davis refers to each woman's relationship to her child, class also creates a maternal behavior in women towards each other. Within "Blackness, Betrayal, and Childhood: Race and Identity in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" Merrill Horton implicitly identifies class as the catalyst for Irene's actions and the mold for Clare's character. "Certainly, class is an extremely important factor in Irene's life; Larsen seems to say that it plays a crucial motivational

role in the life of the passer and that it also shapes, restricts, and ultimately controls certain behavior” (Horton 32). As the authorial voice of the text, Irene defines Clare for readers, and as the maternal model her actions also attempt to bound Clare’s character. Consequently, the class structure creates a female community that substitutes for the non-existent mother by defining and confining female sexuality.

Irene becomes the enforcer of propriety because of her economic status. When she grows exhausted and overheated during her shopping expedition, Irene seeks a breeze and a glass of tea on the roof of the Drayton hotel¹. While enjoying her rest, Irene begins to critique a woman who is sitting at the table next to her. She describes the lady as

An attractive-looking woman, was Irene’s opinion, with those dark, almost, black eyes, and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin. Nice clothes too, just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy, as summer things were so apt to be. (Larsen 148)

Irene’s metaphoric language recognizes the women’s sexuality. The woman’s mouth becomes sexualized by its passionate red color and its inviting flower-like shape. Yet, because Irene identifies this woman as white, as revealed by her ivory skin, the woman is conveniently dressed appropriately for the weather. Although her exotic eyes and sensual mouth scream sex, her clothes reflect respectability because she is white.

Irene continues to watch the woman and make further allowances for her behavior because of her upper-class appearance. As Irene witnesses an exchange between the woman and a waiter, she reveals her middle-class tendency to admire and eventually imitate the behaviors of whites. Irene notices the woman’s smile and remarks

¹ Within the novel’s introduction, Deborah McDowell identifies Irene’s attempt to escape the heat as an example of her sexual repression.

It was an odd sort of smile. Irene couldn't quite define it, but she was sure that she would have classed it, coming from another woman, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter. About this one, however, there was something that made her hesitate to name it that. A certain impression of assurance perhaps. (Larsen 149)

Irene is clearly conscious of her compulsion to place women in specific social classes based on their public sexual behaviors. She recognizes that the woman is unable to restrain her sexuality, but her mind is unable to conceive such wanton actions because the woman appears to be white and wealthy. As a result, the woman's flirtatious display becomes a sign of upper-class confidence instead of working-class licentiousness.

When Irene returns her glance back to the stranger, she finds that the woman is looking at her. Under the woman's intense gaze, Irene feels as if her own appearance is being classed. As White reveals, fashion becomes an obvious signifier of class status. As a result, Irene immediately begins to check her attire when she believes her appearance is being policed by the other woman. "Feeling her color heighten under the continued inspection, she slid her eyes down...Had she, in her haste in the taxi, put her hat on backwards? Guardedly she felt at it. No....Something wrong with her dress?...Perfectly all right. *What* was it?" (Larsen 149) Irene frets over her appearance until she suspects that the woman notices that Irene is an African American in the midst of the white upper-class establishment. Irene worries that her middle-class imitation of whiteness—whether a conscious or unconscious decision to pass—is not good enough. Yet, Irene discovers that the woman she has idealized as the epitome of white femininity and respectability is actually her childhood friend Clare passing as white.

Therefore, Irene's difficulty in classing the "white" woman becomes explained by Clare's revelation that she is passing. Suddenly the confident actions of the "white" woman become sexually tainted by Clare's humble beginnings. When the waiter approaches the two women, Irene views Clare's actions with a working class perspective. Irene notices, "Again the odd upward smile. Now, Irene was sure that it was too provocative for a waiter" (Larsen 152). In addition, Irene recalls rumors of Clare's sexual licentiousness or her "having way" with white men (Larsen 153). The adolescent gossip alludes to images of the black female slave as a hypersexual woman who desired her white master's sexual attention. The jezebel image becomes associated with working-class blacks and becomes an addition to the list of negative representations from which the middle-class attempts to distinguish itself. As a result, although Clare appears to have overcome her childhood poverty by passing and marrying a successful white man, Irene's middle-class scrutiny will not allow Clare to shed those stereotypical sexual behaviors of the working-class. "Well, Irene acknowledged, judging from her appearance and manner, Clare seemed certainly to have succeeded in having a few of the things she wanted" (Larsen 153). Although Clare is rich now, her sexuality is still judged by her working-class origins.

Therefore, class becomes the site in which female identity, specifically sexuality, is shaped. Class creates two polar female identities: the repressed and the expressive. Clare's working class origins mold her and continue to identify her as a sexually uninhibited woman. In contrast, Irene's middle-class status binds her own sexual expression and encourages her to repress others. The interaction between these two classes, founded on the middle-class' compulsion to police the working-class, is

represented by the interaction between Irene and Clare. Each woman's identity, defined by interaction with the other, is analogous to a mother and daughter relationship. Hence, class creates a type of female community that substitutes for the absent mothers.

In contrast, *Sula* does not address class issues as explicitly as *Passing*. The community in which the action is set, the Bottom, has a homogeneous class structure—the working class—although both novels are set within the same time period. However, class stratification is symbolically represented within *Sula* in two ways: through the sexual behaviors of maternal figures and by their domestic spaces. Both the mother and the house create *Sula's* female legacy, the space in which class operates. Like *Passing*, the interaction between class and female legacy creates two distinct consciousnesses that shape Nel and Sula's sexual identities.

The first consciousness is a repressed sexual identity created through containment in *Sula's* Nel. In her article "Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" Patricia McKee identifies Nel's mother, Helene, as one of the "first characters who practice strict containments and limitations of experience that keep things in their places" (42). She lives in a strict world of restrictions, whose boundaries force Nel to create her own identity. McKee focuses on a trip to New Orleans for Nel's great-grandmother's, Cecile Sabat, funeral as the epitome of Helene's patterns of containment. Within this passage and her containment theme, McKee identifies Helene's middle class strivings.

While traveling, Helene accidentally wanders into a white train car and is immediately faced with the conductor's racial intolerance. When questioned about her actions, Helene automatically "licked her lips" (Morrison 21). Then she looks to the black passengers in the next car, "saw their closed faces, their locked eyes, and turned for

the compassion to the gray eyes of the conductor" (Morrison 21). Despite her innocent mistake, the conductor shows no leniency and puts her back into her "racial place" both physically and mentally. Helene then:

For no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel understood then or later, she smiled. Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moment before, Helene smiled. Smiled dazzlingly and co-quettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor. (Morrison 21)

Helene unconsciously attempts to contain this experience and maintain her dignity by using her sexuality. Her first response—to lick her lips—reveals the moment in which Helene decides to use her sexuality to gain power in a situation where her race oppresses her. When she realizes that the black men will not—or cannot—help her, she directs her female wiles on the power figure—the white male. Her concluding smile reinforces the seductiveness of licking her lips. Despite the power she hopes to attain by her sensual actions, she reveals her working-class morals and loses esteem with her daughter and the black men.

Adhering to her containment motif, McKee explains that

Helene is watched by others who see her body as that of a 'loose' woman, as 'custard'. Therefore, Helene must contain not only her own slips but the way she spreads into someone else when men look at her. On the train south, she feels herself losing her place as Helene Wright and slipping into an identity with her mother, the whore. Then she sees herself losing her

place in the men's eyes. They reflect not Helene Wright, nor her mother, but just another black woman in sexual complicity with a white man.² (44)

This excerpt reveals that Helene's compulsion to contain herself is based on her fear of "any sign of her mother's wild blood" and the inability to repress her own sexuality (Morrison 17). Helene's attempts to control and restrict reflect her middle class strivings. She is fighting against her mother's "working girl" promiscuity as well as the hypersexual antebellum jezebel image. However, the suppression of her natural sensuality causes her to empower the very image she wants to refute; her smile sexually associates her with the white master and the so-called licentious slave woman. Consequently, Nel decides that if Helene "were really custard, then there was a chance Nel was too...She wanted to make sure ...that no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly" (Morrison 22). Helene's pattern of containment is a rebellion against her working-class female legacy, and it becomes a perpetuation of that struggle for her daughter.

When Helene and Nel attend Cecile's funeral, the text reveals the very model of sexuality Helene attempts to refute. Rochelle, Helene's mother, exhibits a lack of containment that is symbolized by her excessive use of perfume. As Helene and Nel enter Cecile's house, they observe that "No one other than Mr. Martin seemed to be in the house, but a sweet odor as of gardenias told them that someone else had been" (Morrison 24). Although Rochelle is in the garden when the Helene and Nel arrive, her presence, as represented by her perfume, is not restricted to her own body but owns the air of the house. Although Rochelle and her family are estranged, her sexuality allows her the

² Patricia McKee's analysis of this scene leads me to my sexual interpretation. In addition, I apply her theory of containment to other moments in the novel that she does not analyze in her article.

power to claim space. When Rochelle enters the house, the conversation between the three generations of women hangs in the “gardenia air” (Morrison 25). The scented air reflects her supposed working-class lack of propriety and respect for social norms.

While Helene faces her mother for the first time since her grandmother removed her from her mother’s custody, Nel realizes that

It was [Rochelle] who carried the gardenia smell. This tiny woman with the softness and glare of a canary. In that somber house that held four Virgin Marys, where death sighed in every corner and candles sputtered, the gardenia smell and canary-yellow dress emphasized the funeral atmosphere surrounding them. (Morrison 25)

Despite Rochelle and Cecile’s estrangement, Rochelle’s personality dominates the funeral scene. The text identifies her permeating perfume and her brightly colored dress not only in opposition to the funeral scene but actually helping to create the desolate atmosphere by accentuating the dismal and finite aura of death in her brilliance and pervasiveness. In addition, Rochelle stands in stark contrast to the chastity epitomized by the Virgin Mary, whose presence is exponentially emphasized by the quantity of the statues. Although Cecile attempts to contain female sexuality, as represented by the ultimate model of female purity, Rochelle’s sexual identity cannot be contained, as seen by the power of her perfume. It is this legacy of uninhibited sexual nature that Helene struggles against.

Yet, Helene does not fight against Rochelle’s sexual legacy for herself but also for Nel. Helene stands as a boundary for containment; she alienates Cecile from her

grandchild just as she alienates Nel from her grandmother through language. The text states

The woman in the yellow dress leaned forward. "Come. Come, chere."

Helene interrupted. "We have to get cleaned up. We have been three days on the train and had no chance to wash or..."

"Comment t'appelle?"

"She doesn't talk Creole."

"Then you ask her." (Morrison 26)

Helene obviously uses Nel's lack of cleanliness as a buffer to keep Rochelle from physically reaching out to her; Helene's automatic focus on the body as an excuse is related to her image of Rochelle as a sexual object—a body. She is not trying to protect Rochelle from Nel's travel odor but to save Nel from Rochelle's sexual contamination. When Rochelle attempts a verbal exchange, Helene reveals that Nel cannot speak Creole. By alienating Nel from the language of her past, Helene can contain Rochelle's sexual legacy and keep it from her more respectable present.

Similarly, when Nel shows interest in Rochelle and unconsciously identifies with her grandmother's sexuality, Helene acts as a buffer to separate grandmother and grandchild.

In the kitchen, being soaped head to toe by her mother, Nel ventured an observation. "She smelled so nice. And her skin was so soft."

Helene rinsed the cloth. "Much handled things are always soft."

"What does 'vwah' mean?"

"I don't know," her mother said. "I don't talk Creole." She gazed at her daughter's wet buttocks. "And neither do you." (Morrison 27)

Once again, the dialogue between Rochelle and Nel (or lack thereof when Helene functions as a translator) occurs with references or images of the body. Helene is unconsciously trying to wash away the sexualized gardenia perfume and not the odor of travelling from Nel's body. When Nel mentions Rochelle's perfume and skin, Helene immediately and contemptuously alludes to Rochelle's promiscuity. Like Rochelle, Nel's second effort to connect with Rochelle is through language; she attempts to gain the language of the sexualized. In order to ensure that she has contained her own sexuality, Helene denies any knowledge of Creole and affirms Nel's ignorance also. Helene's glance at Nel's buttocks, when she denies her Creole and sexual legacy, supports Kathryn Bond Stockton's article "Heaven's Bottom's" on debasement as represented by the anus, toilet, or the bottom as a position in *Sula*³. With her glance Helene identifies Rochelle's language—which is symbolic of her sexuality—as debased, and consequently she excludes Nel from Creole. Nel's exclusion results in a containment of Nel's sexuality also.

As a manifestation of Helene's need to contain her sexuality, Helene's domestic space is also contained; her house is very ordered and restricted. Nel "regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread" (Morrison 29). The house's oppressiveness is a result of Helene's striving to distinguish her home from "the soft lights and flowered carpets of the Sundown House," where her mother works (Morrison 17). Consequently, "Any enthusiasms little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her

³ Although the idea of the various representations of the bottom as debasement in *Sula* is Stockton's, she does not mention this scene in her article.

daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison 18). Nel's ability to express herself is affected by the confinement of her home. All her dreams and desires are suppressed by her mother's sexual and domestic repression created by Helene's middle-class strivings.

Yet, Nel eventually reacts to her environment and her mother's boundaries with disdain and rebels. After her trip to New Orleans, she looks at her face in the mirror and whispers "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (Morrison 28). Elizabeth Abel interprets this quote through an psychoanalytic model of female child development in her article "(E)merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women." Abel states that "This is an archetypal daughter's dilemma: to achieve independence from one's mother, frequently by devaluing her, without thereby devaluing one's feminine identity" (427). Nel rebels against her mother just like her mother rebelled against hers. She attempts to cast off her female legacy by stating that she is not their daughter—the daughter of three generations of sexual rebellion. Nel even attempts to evade the identity Helene has shaped for her by disassociating herself from her name. It becomes a symbol of containment and echoes her inability to speak Creole and her alienation from language. Her name is something given to her, and she tries to create her own sense of self by stating that her name does not contain who she is. Nel's affirmation of "new-found me-ness gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother" (Morrison 29). At this point Nel is able to befriend Sula, Nel's social opposite.

Unlike Nel's female development, Sula enjoys an uninhibited home life. In fact, Nel "preferred Sula's woolly house...where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions...and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from

deep inside her pockets or read you a dream" (Morrison 29). Sula's house and her female legacy are embodied in the modifier "woolly." The Peace home is a place that is in constant disarray and allows continuous traffic. Just as the house has no clear shape or form, neither do the women of the house. Nel identifies Hannah as having no direction, and interestingly, she associates Eva with the abstract through dreams. Nel's ability to dream in the Peace house is in stark contrast to her lack of imagination under her mother's influence. Whereas the Wrights are part of the contained, Nel recognizes the lack of containment in the Peace home and women.

In contrast to Helene's containment theme, McKee identifies Sula's female legacy as a pattern of expulsion that creates sexually free women. One way in which McKee exemplifies Sula's grandmother, Eva's, manipulation of boundaries is through her reading of the renovations of their house.

Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding things: more stairways—there were three sets to the second floor—more rooms, doors, stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out unto the porch only and inaccessible from any other part of the house; other that you could only get to by going through somebody's bedroom. (Morrison 30)

Sula's house expands whimsically, with no reason or direction because Eva refuses to pay homage to boundaries. McKee contrasts Helene and Eva when she states that the Peace house "does not seem primarily a container so much as an excrescence" (45). She goes on to explicitly compare the two women:

Helene with her good form—her beautiful manner, bearing, and clothes—represents herself with a consistency that she lacks in her body and in her history. Eva's equally careful representation of her body presents an absence that also sets limits to her bodily and historical inconsistency. One woman places herself out of bounds to maintain consistency; the other rules out history by maintaining inconsistency. (McKee 46)

McKee uses the metaphor of containment to describe Helene's need to control her sexualized heritage, and she uses expulsion to explain Eva's missing leg. However, she fails to analyze Eva's patterns of expulsion in relation to a Peace sexual ideology, which expels Eva and her daughter Hannah from middle-class morals and identifies them with "typical" working-class sexuality.

The uninhibited growth of the Peace house is analogous to the sexual abandon of Eva and Hannah, which helps mold Sula's sexual identity.

With the exception of [Eva's estranged husband], those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. (Morrison 41)

In this passage the influence of a female sexual legacy is identified. Eva bestowed upon her daughters an indiscriminate love of men, and their actions, in turn, set an example for Sula. Both Eva and Hannah function outside the boundaries of female sexuality in an attempt to rebel against their historical legacy of the sexualized enslaved Jezebel.

Eva attempts to refute this image and establishes her sexuality by redirecting the male gaze from her body and refocusing men's attention on her mind. Although the text never explicitly states why Eva loses one of her legs, its absence does not affect her sexuality.

Eva was old, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentlemen callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter. The men wanted to see her calf, that neat shoe, and watch the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distances in her eyes. They wanted to see the joy in her face as they settled down to play checkers, knowing that even when she beat them, as she always did, somehow, in her presence, it was they who had won something. (Morrison 41)

Despite the clear statement of Eva's abstinence this passage expresses the sensuality of the gaze. The men wanted to look upon Eva's body, but the gaze is distorted by historical standards because their view of her neatly dressed remaining leg illuminates the stark absence of the missing leg. Similarly, the text focuses on the absence of sex instead of the sexuality within Eva's exchanges with the men. The games Eva plays with men—the teasing and the checkers—are substitutions for sex. This excerpt alludes to a type of sexual anticipation with its passionate language: “the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distances in her eyes” and “the joy in her face.” Yet, this does not result from a physical indulgence but a mental one. Eva challenges them with her “concentration of manlove” (Morrison 42). Her sensuality redirects their gaze from those

parts that typically represent the female sexuality (the breasts and genitalia) to those things that are not physically present, like her missing leg and her intellectual presence.

On the other hand, Hannah complicates the working-class loose woman image by negating its licentiousness for a type of innocence. Hannah's "flirting was sweet, low, and guileless. Without ever a pat of the hair, a rush to change clothes or a quick application of paint, with no gesture whatsoever, she rippled with sex" (Morrison 42). Sula's mother does not master seduction based on effort but an effortlessness. Her speech and walk have no deceptive motives; yet, her "Hannah-light" or the slightest attention she bestows upon men is submerged in sexual invitation. Hannah manipulates sexual boundaries by not following a sexualized female archetype. "She would fuck practically anything [which includes the husbands of friends and neighbors], but sleeping with someone implied for a measure of trust and a definite commitment" (Morrison 44). Hannah draws a distinction between sex and intimacy, and although she chooses the less respectable of the two (sex), her ability to differentiate maintains her own unique sense of purity. All the women of the town reject her: the good women think she is "nasty," the prostitutes "resented Hannah's generosity," while the adulterous women could not identify with the lack of passion and jealousy Hannah attaches to her affairs (Morrison 44). Although McKee does not address Hannah, her definition of expulsion does. McKee writes "Spaces between are of more concern here than spaces per se, with an unusual amount of space given over to access" (46). McKee identifies "spaces" as areas within boundaries; space is clearly defined and restricted. She emphasizes the "spaces between" because they are areas that exist outside of borders; they are accessible because they are not restricted. Similarly, Hannah's alienation from the women of the town

reveal that she exists outside the boundaries of female sexuality. She does not conform to social standards because she has sex indiscriminately, and she does not impose restrictions on others because she does not experience possessiveness. Hannah is neither here nor there, and this lack of definition creates an essence of innocence or naturalness about her.

In addition, Hannah's space between defined sexual identities is reflected by the places she has sex. Sexual acts take place in the domestic spaces of the house like the kitchen and not the intimate spaces of the individual like the bedroom.

But since in that house there were no places for private and spontaneous lovemaking, Hannah would take the man down into the cellar in the summer where it was cool back behind the coal bin ... or in the winter they would step into the pantry up against the shelves she had filled with canned goods.... (Morrison 43)

During her sexual acts, Hannah surrounds herself with household objects necessary for survival: coal for heat and goods for food. These necessary items reflect her need for "some touching every day" (Morrison 44). However, these spaces, specifically the cellar, suggest the theme of debasement mentioned earlier when Helene's gaze falls on Nel's buttocks. Hannah takes her partner to the *cellar*, *behind* a bin of *coal*. The imagery suggests an abnormality in Hannah's sex life that reinforces the idea that she is expelled from the ideal bourgeois female sexual identity.

Hannah's lack of containment in her sexual space is further revealed by her distaste for having sex in rooms that would usually guarantee her the most privacy.

When [the cellar or pantry] were not available, she would slip into the seldom-used parlor, or even up to her bed-room. She liked the last place least, not because Sula slept in the room with her but because her love mate's tendency was always to fall asleep afterward...So she ended up a daylight lover...(Morrison 44)

Although the parlor is a very public place, the Peace's parlor is seldom-used unlike the pantry. Furthermore, Hannah prefers her own bedroom the least. Her preference is not in respect for her daughter but for her own need to keep her sexual acts and intimacy separate.

Therefore, Hannah illuminates what she does in the confines of a cellar or pantry by performing it during the day in a seeming paradox. Ironically, Hannah's distinction between sex and intimacy works similarly to Helene's attempt at containment. McKee states that both Helene and Eva "seem primarily preoccupied, then, with controlling, or even patrolling, boundaries in order to control their definition of their own selves" (46). This fixation with sexual boundaries is also inherent in Hannah through her female legacy. She draws boundaries in her sexual identity in order to freely express her sexuality in contrast to Helene's need to suppress her own sexuality. Hannah's commitment to expression reflects the working-class rebellion against restrictive middle-class social standards.

Like Helene, Hannah directly influences her daughter, Sula's, sexual identity. The text reveals that there has been only one occasion that Sula actually witnesses intimacy between Hannah and a man. Once when Sula stays home from school, she "found her mother in the bed, curled spoon in the arms of a man" (Morrison 44). Yet on

numerous occasions, Sula witnesses her mother's before and after appearance when she enters and exits the sexualized domestic space. "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, but otherwise unremarkable" (Morrison 44). What Sula observes is the lack of intimacy Hannah displays in her affairs. Hannah's sexual response devalues sexuality for Sula and subsequently encourages Sula's own expressive identity.

Although the lack of passion she witnesses on Hannah's face contradicts what her peers teach her about sex, the influence of female legacy appears to be stronger in shaping female sexual identity. "Outside the house, where children giggled about underwear, the message was different. So she watched her mother's face and the face of the men when they opened the pantry door and made up her own mind" (Morrison 44). The text states that Sula ignores society in favor of drawing her conclusions from her mother's actions—unlike Nel who reacts to the soldiers' disgust toward her mother. Yet, unknown to Sula, Hannah's sexuality is connected with her society. Hannah is able to express her self sexually because of her class values and her alienation from the female community. Able notes that "Because she does not give up her preoedipal bond with her mother, the girl maintains her earliest relational mode of primary identification and continues to experience permeable ego boundaries and to define herself relationally" (417). Whereas Nel breaks her maternal bond by affirming her me-ness, Sula does not disassociate from Hannah. Instead she identifies with and duplicates Hannah's sexual behavior.

Sula takes Hannah's sexual example and goes beyond it. Like her mother, Sula is also alienated from the female community because of her expressed sexuality. However, just as she is separated from other women she also becomes the standard by which they can define themselves—just like the working class' alienation defines the bourgeoisie. In this way, Sula becomes the epitome of McKee's "spaces between."

And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible—for she would lay their husbands once and then no more. Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgement, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula bruised. (Morrison 115)

Sula's disregard of sexual boundaries (the monogamy of marriage) becomes a space from which the women of the Bottom's can define themselves like the black bourgeoisie. Sula's judgement caused them to question their own choice in men. Like Irene, they are threatened by Sula's sexuality—not because it took away anything from the townswomen but because it affected their own self identity. Sula's indiscriminate distaste with the men leave their women more committed to be more supportive wives. As a result, the female legacy becomes creates a class structure that influences the interactions between women.

In conclusion, class, female legacy, and sexual identities create a complex foundation on which both pairs of women build their friendships. Within *Passing*, class functions as the major motivating factor for Irene and Clare's relationship. Irene creates a female community by trying to restrict Clare's sexual behaviors. While in *Sula*, female

legacy creates a psuedo-class hierarchy. Nel's and Sula's rebellion against and identification with their maternal models establishes their friendship and their social status within the community. Therefore, class and female legacy work together to create Irene's and Nel's repressed identities just as it molds Clare's and Sula's uninhibited sexual personalities.

Class and female legacy shapes the expressive and repressed identities, and these character personalities are manifested in the women's desire for female friendship. As we will see in the next chapter, the desire that cements the friendship between women is not a sexual attraction but an identity attraction. Since these binary sexual identities are now established as emotional opposites, the following chapter will explore why they are naturally attracted and eventually repulsed by each other. Specifically, the expressive woman's actions are liberating yet threatening for the repressed women. The emotionally restrained individual wants to identify with their sexual "other," but the sexual other also becomes someone from which they desire to distinguish themselves. The women accomplish this paradoxical dynamic through their heterosexual relationship.

Desire For or Desire to Be: Female Intimacy and Heterosexual Relations

The African American feminist theory of same-sex desire suggests that each woman within the novels has a sexual desire for the other. Homo-eroticism leaves no allowances to define the female friendship as simply an emotional attachment. Subsequently, the women's heterosexual relationships become criticized as superficial accessories. When critics view each type of interaction in terms of sexual desires, the female protagonist can only maintain one passionate relationship—either her friend or her man. Although desire is often reduced to simply a lust for someone, desire is also a longing to be someone. For example, the class structure established in Chapter 1 is also inherently based on desire. The desire for sexual relations does not create the passionate class strivings and social rebellions in *Passing* and *Sula* ; instead, the characters' desire for a specific social identity motivates their class based behaviors. When relationships are regarded in terms of a complex concept of desire, the female friendship and the heterosexual relationship do not have to compete or negate one another. They complementary work to shape the feminine identity. As mentioned in the previous chapter, several social and familial structures create the climate for the female friendship. This chapter will explore the desires fulfilled within the friendship and the heterosexual relationship. In addition, this section will examine the attraction and repulsion dynamic within each female friendship that encourages the women's relationships with men. Needs that are not met by the female friendship are satisfied within the heterosexual relationship and vice versa. Therefore, both relationships function as a tool for each woman to define herself—to fulfill her desire to be.

A woman's desire for identity encourages her to seek an emotional intimacy with other women. Although *Passing* and *Sula* are relatively contemporary novels, the concept of intimate female friendships is not new to society. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explores the emotional intensity within the letters between women in her book *Disorderly Conduct / Visions of Gender in Victorian America*. Smith-Rosenberg states

... an abundance of manuscript evidence suggests that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women routinely formed emotional ties with other women. Such deeply felt same-sex friendships were casually accepted in American society. Indeed ... a female world of varied and yet highly structured relationships appears to have been an essential aspect of American society. (53)

Within the personal writings of white women, Smith-Rosenberg found friendships that range from adolescent bonds, sisterly love, and sensual vows. Yet, these relationships between women are not criticized or seen as unusual. Instead, the ties between women become an integral part of their acculturation and socialization. The emotional entanglements created between natural and adopted mothers, daughters, sisters, cousins, and female friends are part of women's social identity development and not their sexual orientation.

Smith-Rosenberg argues that theories, such as latent homosexuality, developed to explain same-sex relationships are often paradoxical or debatable. In addition, she finds that it is a relatively modern phenomenon to view female friendship in such binary terms as "homosexual" or "heterosexual."

The twentieth-century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, gentility and platonic love, is alien to the emotions and attitudes of nineteenth century and fundamentally distorts the nature of these women's emotional interaction. (Smith-Rosenberg 59)

Within the women's writings, Smith-Rosenberg finds that women had an emotional significance in one another's lives. As time changed, the view of that friendship also changed. The nineteenth century concept of an emotional same-sex friendship is reduced to a rigid homosexual-heterosexual system imposed by the twentieth century sexual ideology. Therefore, what used to be considered female intimacy is now questionably lesbian desire. Interestingly, Smith-Rosenberg criticizes the current change of perspective on past normalcy; she does not state that the actual nature of female friendships has also transformed in order to incite the twentieth century ideology. Critics Smith, McDowell, and Johnson contribute to the twentieth-century tendency to label texts or same-sex relationships as sexual or homo-erotic. While neither text has an eighteenth or nineteenth century setting, Irene and Clare and Nel and Sula still maintain an eighteenth or nineteenth century friendship. The characters' friendships are just as emotionally invested and integral to their identity development.

Although Smith-Rosenberg bases her analysis primarily on the diaries and correspondence between eighteenth and nineteenth century women of different classes, family structures, regions, and religious affiliations, her conclusions on female intimacy and affection are still accurate for twentieth century women of color. Despite several

distinguishing factors, all women experience a gender oppression that fosters female intimacy. Smith-Rosenberg reveals

There are indications in contemporary sociological and psychological literature that female closeness and support networks have continued into the twentieth century—not only among ethnic and working-class groups but even among the middle class. (61)

She alludes to materials that explicitly link women's friendship of the past to those of the present. Furthermore, the intimacy between women does not only cross time, but it also crosses race, ethnic, and class boundaries. Although society's view of them has changed, the intimate relationship between women has not changed. A passionate female bond, exclusive to men and based on friendship, is just as prevalent in the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth century, and as in the texts of *Passing* and *Sula*.

Like Smith-Rosenberg's historical findings, female bonds are also established in the modern novel through women's writings. Within *Passing*, a letter reveals Clare's emotional investment within the same-sex relationship. The novel's first chapter ends with an excerpt of Clare's letter to Irene after a lengthy estrangement. Clare passionately writes:

'...For I am lonely, so lonely ... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life ... You can't know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I would be free of ... It's like an ache, a pain that never ceases...and it's your fault
'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps have this

terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago...'

(Larsen 145)

McDowell suggests Clare's letter has clear sexual overtones. Yet the passion evident in Clare's letter is not directed at Irene, but towards the African American community to which Irene belongs. Clare's longing, aching, pain, wanting, and wild desire is not a sexual attraction for Irene, but a desire for the black community from which Clare is estranged. Her writing states that she is lonely and her life is pale, and she misses the brightness of the past she chooses to deny. The letter's use of light has both metaphoric and literal meaning. Clare's life is pale because she is unhappy and because she is living her life as a white woman. She remembers her past as bright pictures because her past includes the colorfulness of her black heritage. Clare blames Irene for her nostalgia because Irene becomes a familiar icon for the African American community. Therefore, the fervent letter reveals that Clare does not have a desire for Irene but a desire to be Irene—an African American woman. Although Clare rebels against color distinctions by passing, her letter reveals that she misses her African American identity. Her longing for Irene is really her desire for the racial identity Irene has but Clare cannot assume.

Similarly, Irene is attracted to Clare because of Irene's lack of access into Clare's white upper class world. Their mutual exclusion reflects the female networks Smith-Rosenberg identifies and associates their friendship as a nineteenth century female relationship. As a woman who is passing, Clare becomes a magnetic source of information for Irene's black middle class inquisitiveness.

The truth was, she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of

“passing,” this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one’s chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. ... She was unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent. (Larsen 157)

Irene is not drawn to Clare because of her hidden lesbianism but because of her repressed sense of adventure and her own desire to pass for white. Horton reveals that “Irene’s attraction to Clare is the attraction of the starlet to the star, of the meek child to the brave, of the amateur passer to the professional” (Horton 41). What Horton implicitly addresses is the repressed woman’s attraction to the expressive woman. Irene compulsively meets Clare on numerous occasions despite her reservations because of her inability to satisfy her curiosity about passing. This excerpt reveals Irene’s unconscious longing for a liberating experience much like Clare desires more vibrancy in her life. Irene’s tone reveals that she desires the hazardous, strange, and unfriendly, and she admires Clare’s ability to break away. In fact, she is so overcome by her passion for the life that Clare leads, she is unable to form an appropriate way to express her hunger for covetness without revealing its intensity. Therefore, Irene fulfills her desire for an upper-class identity within her friendship.

Parallel to Irene and Clare’s complementary desire for identity, Sula and Nel are attracted to one another because of their different personalities. As the expressive friend, Sula is fascinated by Nel’s reliability.

Although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any

emotion for more than three minutes. Yet there was one time when that was not true, when she held on to a mood for weeks, but even that was in Nel's defense. (Morrison 53)

Within Nel, Sula finds a stability that does not exist within her own limitless personality. Nel's dependable personality has the power to neutralize Sula's mercurial passions. When Sula is able to maintain an emotion for a substantial period of time, it is a result of her friendship with Nel to become temporarily stable not because of her own strength or natural desire to do so. For Sula, the female friendship validates qualities she would typically scorn.

While Nel gives Sula a model for boundaries or containment, Sula provides Nel with a model to dodge rules and restrictions. Nel's repressed personality is attracted to Sula's iconoclast attitude. She is free to shape her own identity within her friendship with Sula. As children they explore whatever interests them, which fulfills Nel's sense of adventure. Rebelliously, Nel stops trying to alter her nose under her mother's, Helene, demand. As women, they avoid priorities, which liberates Nel's sense of responsibility. Nel loses interest in her straight hair and all the etiquette, decorum, and propriety that verifies her status within the black middle class.

Sula's and Nel's female legacy and class identification create such a strong influence on their complimentary personalities that "They found relief in the each other's personality" (53). Coleman shapes the women's friendship into a psychological model of development and compares it to Lacan's mirror stage. She writes:

I prefer to view [Sula and Nel] as two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche. In other words, Sula and Nel represent two parts

of a psychological self: individually or apart, Nel is the superego or the conscience, and Sula is the id or the pleasure and unconscious desire of the psyche; together they form the ego, the balance between the superego and the id, and what is usually considered to be a single identity. (Coleman 151)

As the moral and responsible girl, Coleman accurately labels Nel's repressed, middle-class identity as the superego. Coleman also correctly identifies Sula's rebellious, carefree, working-class identity as the id. Although singularly these character traits have destructive possibilities, the extremely contrasting personalities equalize the friendship. Each girl's strengths compliment the other girl's weaknesses so that any personality characteristic becomes an asset within the female bond they create through friendship.

In addition, Sula and Nel are also drawn to each other through their mutual exclusion—somewhat analogous to Clare's and Irene's separation from the African American and white worlds, respectively. This exclusion also echoes Smith-Rosenberg's female intimacy created through gender oppression. Sula and Nel share a racial and gender exclusion that underlies their mutual attraction.

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. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. (Morrison 52)

Not only were their personalities complimentary, but as African American women, Sula and Nel shared a more fundamental bond. They realized that they could be nothing more than what they are to each other because in the larger society they are invisible. Their

relationship exemplifies Abel's model for female friendship. She states, "Through the intimacy which is knowledge, friendship becomes a vehicle of self-definition for women, clarifying identity through relation to an other who embodies and reflects an essential aspect of self" (Abel 416). Sula's and Nel's exclusion from the rights and benefits of society encourages them to create their own female world that would nurture their specific identity as black women.

As a result, together Sula and Nel had "two throats and one eye..." (Morrison 147). The women had two different bodies yet they shared a common ideological and mental perspective. Since they are not a part of the white male society, they conceived something else—African American female intimacy. "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perception of things" (Morrison 55). The women's alienation from the white male dominated society is not inherently lesbian like Smith suggests, but it becomes a conscious separation that allows black women to become valid, independent, and powerful. The intimacy built between Sula and Nel allows them to have control over their own consciousness; consequently, their friendship becomes an environment that fulfills their desire to be.

Although each pair of friends finds a passionate or intimate attachment among themselves, their same-sex relationships do not hinder their relations with men. The women in both novels are all involved in significant heterosexual relationships. Yet because none of these relationships are successful, critics McDowell and Smith question the validity of heterosexuality within *Passing* and *Sula*, respectively. McDowell comments "Although Clare and Irene ... are married, theirs are a sexless marriages" (xxiii).

Admittedly, neither woman appears to engage in intimate relations; Clare fears producing a dark child while Irene is simply sexually repressed. According to McDowell, as a result, "Larsen can flirt, if only by suggestion, with the idea of a lesbian relationship between them" (xxiii). McDowell suggests that the lack of physical relations within each woman's marriage allows Larsen to subtly redirect their passions into the female friendship. Apparently, McDowell reasons that Clare and Irene's marriages are invalid because there is no sex. Yet, she can confirm a lesbian relationship although Irene and Clare have no physical sexual contact. McDowell does not evaluate both relationships in the same manner. Sexual relations are not consistently used to determine the nature of each relationship. The existence of children reveals the sexuality in both marriages, yet there is not evidence of a sexual relationship between the two women. Consequently, she unjustly limits the heterosexual relationship to sexual intercourse and generalizes the homosexual relationship to flirtation and innuendo.

In a similar fashion, Smith elevates the sexual nature of the friendship by reducing the significance of heterosexuality. She annuls the male-female relationships in *Sula* because she does not believe they are represented positively. Smith argues:

Despite the apparent heterosexuality of the female characters I discovered in re-reading *Sula* that it works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and family. (Smith 165)

Supposedly, the troubled heterosexual interactions reveal the authors' critique of heterosexuality, which in turn, indicates the characters' latent homosexuality. It seems

that Smith views the interaction between the same-sex friendship and the heterosexual relationship as a negative correlation. The female character is limited to only one significant relationship; she can only maintain and invest in one intimate connection. Moreover, this relationship is only considered significant when it is successful and idealistic.

Both McDowell and Smith fail to realize that by each novel's conclusion, neither female friendship remains intact. In fact, the conclusion of *Passing* suggests that Irene may be responsible for Clare's fatal fall from a balcony. At the end of *Sula*, Nel's friendship is estranged for years because of Sula's affair with her husband. Yet, neither McDowell nor Smith assume from these betrayals that women cannot be friends. The critics recognize the failure of the male-female interaction; yet, they ignore the collapse of the same-sex relationship. Therefore, one can conclude that each woman's heterosexual relationship does not negate or contest the female friendship. The female characters independently establish each relationship, and therefore, readers should evaluate those relationships independently. In fact, Smith-Rosenberg states that there is every indication in the writings of nineteenth century women that they "considered [same-sex] love both socially acceptable and fully compatible with heterosexual marriage. Emotionally and cognitively, their heterosocial and homosocial worlds were complementary" (Smith-Rosenberg 59). When intimate female friendships are not viewed through the desire for prospective, the same-sex interaction and the heterosexual relationship can cooperatively help each woman define herself. Within each novel, it is specifically the repressed individual that struggles to differentiate herself from the expressive female through her relationship with the male.

Although Irene is clearly attracted to the class status Clare's image represents, she also feels threatened by that image. As a result, Irene places herself in perpetual competition with Clare in order to create her own image. Tate reveals that Irene is "constantly aware that she is comparatively mediocre in the light of Clare's sheer loveliness" (143). As Irene comments on Clare's obvious beauty, she begins to feel increasingly more inferior. Irene describes Clare's appearance as "absolute and beyond challenge," leaving no room for competition (Larsen 161). Even in her own social settings within the African American community—from which Clare alienates herself—Irene "[feels] dowdy and commonplace" (Larsen 203). Tate suggests that Irene's compulsion to compare is an effort to "mitigate her growing discontent with suspicions about Clare's infidelity" (Tate 143). Irene's fear of an affair between Clare and her husband, Brian, manifests Irene's beauty and middle-class insecurities.

Expanding Tate's argument, Irene's comparison of beauty depends on her use of the African American male's perspective as the defining factor between herself and Clare. It is Irene's black bourgeois nature to define her own identity by comparing herself to another's social status. Moreover, within a patriarchal society, beauty lies in the eyes of the male beholder. When Irene consults her husband to define Clare's beauty, she is requesting him to define and validate her own black feminine identity. Irene recalls:

Didn't he, she once asked him, think Clare was extraordinarily beautiful?

"No," he answered. "That is, not particularly."

"Brian, you're fooling."

“No, honestly. Maybe I’m fussy. I s’pose she’d be an unusually good-looking white woman. I like my ladies darker. Beside an A-number-one sheba, she simply hasn’t got ‘em.” (Larsen 209)

This excerpt reveals that Irene’s compulsion is not simply about beauty. She not only competes with Clare’s attractiveness but also Clare’s whiteness. As a more identifiable African American—due to her olive skin and her black family—Irene believes she is unable to surpass Clare’s presence despite any attractiveness she may possesses. Irene conveys her inferior feelings throughout the text as she attempts to use her middle-class status and heterosexual relationship to distinguish herself from Clare.

Moreover, Clare’s very act of passing becomes menacing and repulsive to Irene, who values her stable lifestyle. Irene recalls:

... for another flying second she had that suspicion of Clare’s ability for a quality of feeling that was to her strange, and even repugnant. She was aware, too, of a dim premonition of some impending disaster. It was as if Clare Kendry had said to her for whom safety, security, were all-important: “Safe! Damn being safe!” and meant it. (Larsen 195)

Although Clare’s ability to break social rules excites Irene, that same rebellious attitude frightens Irene. In fact, Irene states that that very magnetic quality also revolts her.

When she shares her possibly dangerous portent, readers may assume that Irene is concerned for Clare’s well being. Yet, Irene is only concerned with her own safety for she does not identify any threatening agent except for Clare. Clare’s disregard of social boundaries or moral obligations endangers Irene’s carefully defined and consciously restricted middle-class world. Ironically, Irene’s premonition of disaster does not

foreshadow Irene's destruction but their eventual estranged relationship and ultimately Clare's fatal fall in the novel's conclusion.

Although Clare fails to provide Irene with the security she needs, her marriage to Brian creates a safe environment to diminish her insecurity and fears. Irene's marriage to Brian establishes her place within the black bourgeoisie. Brian's medical career provides Irene with middle-class status while her children permanently anchor her within domesticity. When Irene's security is threatened by Brian's "craving for someplace strange different," Irene manipulates her family to ensure that it remains stable (178). Although to some degree she admires this adventurous desire in Clare, she refuses to tolerate it in her marriage. In this sense, Irene's heterosocial needs supplements her homosocial desires: she wants risk in friendship and needs security in marriage. Irene admits her conscious manipulations to suppress Brian's desires. She believes "She [has] only to direct and guide her man, to keep him going in the right direction" (Larsen 188). Her ability to connive to protect her own self interests is reminiscent of her disgust at Clare's rebellion against boundaries. Irene identifies Clare as selfish when she complains that Clare "still retained her ability to secure the thing that she wanted in the face of any opposition, and in utter disregard of the convenience and desire of others" (Larsen 201). In Irene's opinion, Clare gets what Clare needs by any measures necessary. Ironically, Irene becomes exactly what she fears and detests—a woman without restraint. Therefore, her relationship with both Clare and Brian help define her repressed and repressive identity more accurately. Irene can criticize Clare's rebellion while committing her own subtle acts of rebellion.

Analogous to Irene's complex attraction and repulsion relationship with Clare, Nel also develops a desire to distinguish herself from Sula as they emerge from adolescence. Although Coleman accurately describes the psychological nature of Nel's and Sula's relationship, she fails to recognize Nel's need for individuality and consequently reduces the significance of Nel's marriage. Coleman assumes too much when she states "I believe that Sula and Nel complement or rather *complete* each other" (150). Sula does complement Nel's personality—and vice versa—but Sula does not complete or rather completely fulfill Nel's identity desires. Coleman believes that each woman is "able to maintain their individuality in the sense that neither personality is restricted; neither self is disregarded" (150). The article suggests that each woman can combine to form a single psyche identity and still sustain maintain some personal distinctiveness. Yet, Nel is only able to achieve individuality outside of her female friendship—within her marriage to Jude.

Due to the intimacy of their relationship, people begin to view Sula and Nel as identical. During childhood and adolescence, they girls did not compete, argue, or separate from each other's presence. "...their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's" (Morrison 83). The women appeared to have two bodies but one mind, not only to the community but also to themselves. Coleman argues that this excerpt proves that

When they are together, Sula and Nel are one complete identity.

Furthermore, each woman has partial feelings which combine to form complex emotions. For example, when Nel decides to marry Jude, she is generally indifferent toward the idea. Sula is elated, however. Together,

these emotions combine to form the happiness and anxiety of that a bride-to-be experiences. (Coleman 153)

Coleman reasons that Nel's and Sula's different emotional responses about Nel's upcoming marriage create a complex, more accurate emotion when integrated. Although Coleman argues that Jude's presence only serves to reiterate the oneness of the women, Jude actually serves as the defining agent that provides Nel with an identity separate from Sula. Nel is not indifferent to Jude's marriage proposal; she answers yes to be different. Her marriage is an attempt to erect boundaries in her friendship.

In contrast to Coleman, Abel acknowledges that "The problems of sustaining [a single] entity while allowing for personal growth provide a focus for the novel's exploration of the boundaries of self" (Abel 427). As the repressed individual or the superego, Nel is the character most concerned with limits and definitions. Therefore, it follows that Nel would act out what Abel identifies as a struggle for personal growth. As the id, Sula does not recognize restrictions, even boundaries of self. Although Nel is as invested in the friendship as Sula, as Nel matures, she cannot duplicate Sula's complete immersion into the friendship. Therefore, Nel rebels and seeks the womanly distinction that her marriage provides. Her heterosexual relationship does not negate the intimacy she shares with Sula; her marriage provides an environment for Nel to distinguish her self.

In their youth, Nel and Sula believed "a compliment to one was a compliment to the other," but Nel learns and eventually desires to bask alone in Jude's admiration (Morrison 84).

Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula.

And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle. (Morrison 84)

When Jude selects Nel from Sula, Nel realizes she has another identity outside of her role as Sula's friend. In fact, this excerpt reveals that Nel's desire to be distinct from Sula is greater than her longing to be Sula; Nel's need for individuality is greater than her desire for intimacy. Although Sula grants Nel an emotional freedom, Jude provides a structure that she needs. He shows Nel her parts and validates them: her neck becomes a neck and her smile becomes a miracle. While Sula celebrates fluidity, Jude relates to Nel's conscientiousness. She remains emotionally connected with Sula, but with Jude she remembers her body. Consequently, Sula cannot complete Nel because Sula does not acknowledge such trivialities. Thus, both the same-sex friendship and the heterosexual relationship shapes and nurtures the female identity.

In conclusion, the same-sex friendship is not defined or explained by a simplistic concept of desire. Desire does not only entail a desire for someone but also a desire to be someone. The friendships in *Passing* and *Sula* are not founded on a latent lesbian passion but on each woman's passion for self-discovery. The repressed woman and the expressive woman are attracted to each other because of their differences. What critics mistake as the women's desire for each other is in actuality a desire for what the other woman represents—freedom or control. Intimacy is ultimately a result of their desire to

be their emotional opposite. For both couples, friendship becomes a voyeuristic relationship.

However, not only is this desire ill defined, it is also misunderstood. The intimacy between women is not a reflection upon their heterosexual relationships. The female friendship and heterosexuality do not have a direct correlation; women can establish and maintain close relationships with both men and women. Both the same-sex friendship and the heterosexual relationship contribute to a woman's struggle with self-definition. This is most clearly seen in the heterosexual relationships of the repressed Irene and Nel. Just as the friends complement one another, the female friendship and the heterosexual relationship compliment each other to create a more fulfilling environment for the repressed woman.

Interestingly, the interaction between the same-sex and the heterosexual relationship reveals the paradoxical dynamic within each friendship. Although the repressed individual is attracted to the freedom of the expressed, that very quality is also repulsive. The repulsion is manifested in the friend's need to compete, avoid, or distinguish herself from the expressive individual. Irene and Nel's aversion is a result of their need to validate their identities. Irene must verify her class status while Nel must substantiate her female body. In contrast, the expressive Clare and Sula experience no repulsion. They know no boundaries to their friendship. Perhaps this imbalance facilitates the eventual failure of these friendships.

Conclusion

Female intimacy is clearly shaped by other factors than sexual desire. The intricate interaction between the social and familial structures help establish the emotional ties between women. Specifically, class becomes an obvious catalyst in which female legacy subtly operates, and vice versa. Therefore, the primary factor actually creates the other factor in the latter's absence. *Passing* is clearly based on class strivings. Both Irene's and Clare's class origins determine their identities. Clare's working-class childhood creates her expressive identity while Irene's middle class status shapes her repressed identity. The interaction between these two women creates a class-based female community, where the black bourgeois Irene struggles to define herself by restricting the behaviors of the working-class Clare.

On the other hand, *Sula* is clearly based on the concept of female legacy. Both Nel and Sula have prominent maternal figures that influence their developing identities. Nel's restrictive childhood creates her repressed identity and reflects her mother's middle-class strivings. In contrast, Sula's uninhibited domestic space encourages her free spirit. Her family's failure to adhere to social norms reveals their working-class morals. As a result, the female legacies within the novel create a class structure within the homogenous fictional town.

Since desire is an innate part of class consciousness and strivings, these social and familial structures shape each woman's desire for relationships. The women use their female friendships to fulfill their desire to be the other, meaning friendship is a vehicle to temporarily assume or experience the identity of the other woman. Irene's and Nel's repressed identities can feel liberation through their association with Clare and Sula while

Clare's and Sula's uninhibited identities can appreciate dependability in their relationships with Irene and Nel. As a result, these repressed and expressive identities complement one another. However, the restrained identities are not complete without the distinction from their liberated others that their heterosexual relationships provide.

Irene's and Nel's husbands allow the women to distinguish themselves from the women they both admire and fear; a complex attraction and repulsion pattern between the women results.

Thus, the women's relationship with her female friend and her heterosexual relationship parallel the functions of her class and female legacy. The same-sex friendship is an extension of her female legacy. Like the grandmother-mother-daughter relationship, the relationship between female friends encourages an identification with women but also creates a need to differentiate between women. Irene attempts to use class to disassociate herself from Clare within the pseudo-female community (when Clare passes in the restaurant), just as she uses Brian to distinguish her social identity when she and Clare reestablish their friendship. Similarly, Nel rebels against her mother, Helene, by choosing Sula as a friend like she rebels against Sula by choosing Jude. Despite the contrasting ideologies of Helene and Sula, Nel consistently and effectively separates herself from both types of female intimacy through her use of class and heterosexuality. While Clare and Sula naturally rebel against the concepts of class, race, and sexuality because of their uninhibited identities, the repressed consciousness causes Irene and Nel to define their relationships with women through class and heterosexuality.

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