A Direction of One's Own: Alienation In 'Mrs. Dalloway' and 'Sula' (Toni Morrison)

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"A direction of one's own": Alienation in Mrs. Dalloway and Sula

Before Toni Morrison became the goddess of contemporary literature, she was Chloe Ardellia Wofford, a graduate student at Cornell who, in 1955, completed a master's thesis exploring manifestations of alienation in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Therein, Morrison defines alienation, with its attendant isolation, as the defining literary theme of the twentieth century, and explores the two authors' differing treatments of it in Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and two of Faulkner's novels ("Treatment" 1). She begins by theorizing that Woolf's characters only become self-aware when isolated, and that Faulkner's characters can never attain self-knowledge in isolation (2-3). Ultimately, she determines that while Faulkner and Woolf seek the same ends, the "answer to the questions of death, life, time and morality," they disagree on "what pattern of existence is most conducive to honesty and self-knowledge" (39).

Morrison privileges Faulkner's emphasis on communal connection by reading his position as the "antithesis" to Woolf's (4), and, after all, her later writings clearly reveal the value she places on community. Alienation, writes Morrison, "is not Faulkner's answer" to the problems of modern life (3), and it hardly seems to be hers either. Although Morrison has doubtlessly revised many of the opinions she expressed in her thesis, she continues to tout the dangers of isolation. This apparent rejection of Woolf's preferred strategy for attaining self-knowledge does not, however, mean that Woolf exerts less influence on Morrison's work than does Faulkner, although the lack of critical commentary to that effect might suggest as much.

Although fewer scholars have addressed the topic, Morrison's fiction similarly explores some of Woolf's key themes in ways that allow her characters successfully to navigate the problems of modernity that her thesis identifies. In fact, biographical and theoretical connections suggest that Morrison's work might even have stronger ties to Woolf than to Faulkner. At any rate, such a relationship seems most textually evident between Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway and Morrison's Sula. Though the two novels differ in many respects, at base, they share strikingly similar plots. Mrs. Dalloway's main action reveals much through its depiction of Clarissa Dalloway's interaction with friends and family throughout a day filled primarily with preparations for the party she gives at the novel's conclusion. In the background, one subplot details the last day in the life of Septimus Warren Smith, a World War I veteran suffering from the symptoms of post-traumatic stress that ultimately lead to his suicide, and another deals with Clarissa's girlhood romance with Peter Walsh and friendship with Sally Seton. At the party, Clarissa learns of Septimus's...
suicide from his doctor, Bradshaw, and feels an uncanny connection to him and his tragic end. In *Sula*, Morrison utilizes time differently; rather than relying, as Woolf does, on memory to keep the narrative action in the present, Morrison follows her title character for several years. She tells the story of Sula’s life, though, in Woolf fashion, by outlining Sula’s relationships with her one great love and only true friend, and, much like Clarissa’s connection to Septimus, Sula shares a deep revelatory bond with Shadrack, a veteran of the first world war who exists in a state of altered reality quite similar to the one that traps Septimus.

By noting such likenesses, I do not mean to suggest that Morrison simply retells Woolf’s narrative in an African American context; in fact, she does precisely the opposite. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., speaks to such revisions in *The Signifying Monkey* when he suggests that African American writers often rewrite western texts with “a compelling sense of difference” (xxii). In his study of *Mrs. Dalloway* and alienation, Jeremy Hawthorn determines that while the novel “can present the unsatisfactoriness” of alienation, it “includes no real solution to it” (94). In *Sula*, however, Morrison gets around such limitations via the revolutionary sense of revision that Gates references: she resolves in her fiction the same problems inherent in alienation for Woolf’s characters that her graduate thesis addresses. An examination of the resonant connections between the two novels and the specific ways that Morrison reworks the theme of alienation in a similar narrative setting leads to a greater understanding of both texts; Morrison perhaps encourages such connections, despite her protestations about the anxiety of influence (McKay 151-52).

Morrison begins her thesis chapter on Woolf by quoting a diary entry that Woolf dated October 25, 1920: “Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss . . . its unhappiness is everywhere” (“Treatment” 5).

Early in *Sula* Morrison pointedly utilizes a similar cement walkway as a metaphor when the military hospital releases Shadrack because there “was clearly a demand for space”:

> When he stepped out of the hospital door the grounds overwhelmed him: the cropped shrubbery, the edged lawns, the undeviating walks.
> Shadrack looked at the cement stretches: each one leading clearheadedly to some presumably desirable destination. There were no fences, no warnings, no obstacles at all between concrete and green grass, so one could easily ignore the tidy sweep of stone and cut out in another direction—a direction of one’s own. (10)

Shadrack declines to take the path defined by the sidewalk. Instead, he takes off in what Morrison describes as “a direction of one’s own,” a deliberately placed phrase that necessarily calls to mind Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. In much the same fashion, Morrison’s novel disregards the limitations of alienation that characterize *Mrs. Dalloway*; Morrison defies the inherent tragedy of life as Woolf represents it, builds a sidewalk of her own over that rhetorical abyss by posing alternatives to such alienation. And though Woolf surely never anticipated becoming a foremother to an African American novelist, she alludes to such a possibility in *A Room of One’s Own* when she writes, “For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her—this unknown woman—as the descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions” (80). Although Woolf actually speaks of Mary Carmichael, she could just as easily have referred to Morrison, her own literary descendent.

Morrison challenges the inevitability of alienation in several ways, but she defies it most dramatically through her revision of
the figure of the veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress in order to, as Eileen Barrett puts it, make “literal the mindlessness of war” (27). In reference to another alienated figure, Sula, Patricia McKee argues that the people of Medallion do not ostracize her because of her difference, but rather integrate her as a necessary communal figure, one that “occupies the place of absences people cannot afford to miss” (40). Sula, McKee contends, “is not placed outside the group” because the members come “to depend on her for their own sense of place” (55).

Shadrack seems to occupy a similar position. Unlike Septimus, who has so fully withdrawn from the world that he communicates only with the dead and thinks of his wife as “the unseen” until the brief moment of lucidity just before his death (Dalloway 25), Shadrack has a definite communal connection. He has a home to return to after the war (Sula 14), unlike Septimus who fought valiantly for “an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare’s plays and Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress walking in a square” (Dalloway 86).

Morrison similarly reworks the connection between her veteran and his psychic double. In Mrs. Dalloway, this connection remains completely one-sided as Clarissa imagines Septimus’s suicide and subsequently experiences the epiphany that allows her to surmount her fear of death by somehow placing it into a larger context. Septimus’s suicide causes her to “feel the beauty” and “feel the fun” of life by juxtaposing it with death (186), and makes her realize that, by taking his own life, Septimus “preserved” the meaningful core of his existence:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death. (184)

However, Clarissa alone reaps the benefits of this revelation; Woolf never allows Septimus to meet her, much less derive similar benefit from their connection.

Conversely, Morrison constructs a mutually advantageous bond by allowing Shadrack and Sula to share a similar moment. After the small boy named Chicken Little drowns while playing with Sula and Nel on a riverbank, Sula is spurred by a child’s terror of being caught in an act of wrongdoing and runs to Shadrack’s house to see if he witnessed the event. When Sula enters the house, its order and “restfulness” amaze her. While taking in this initial lesson about the inaccuracy of preconceptions, she speculates, “Perhaps this was not the house of the Shad. The terrible Shad who walked about with his penis out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children, the only black who could curse white people and get away with it” (61-62). Shadrack then returns to find Sula in his home and, rather than scolding her, he “nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in a pleasant conversational tone, a tone of cooled butter, ‘Always’ ” (62).

While telling Nel about the exchange, Sula thinks that Shadrack “had answered a question she had not asked, and its promise licked at her feet” (63); thus, Morrison initially leads readers to believe that Shadrack’s “always” means that he will always keep Sula’s secret. Later, however, it becomes clear that his remark means something quite different to both him and Sula. Near the novel’s end, we learn that Shadrack treasures the purple and white belt that Sula lost as she ran from his cabin as “the one piece of evidence that he once had a visitor in his house” (156), apparently for him a symbol of her effort to reach out to him. Shadrack knows that Sula “had wanted something—from him. Not fish not work, but something only he could give” (156), and he decides that she wants him to reassure her of the exis-
ence of an afterlife. Consequently, he says “always” so that “she would not have to be afraid of the change—the falling away of skin, the drip and slide of blood, and the exposure of bone underneath. He had said ‘always’ to convince her, assure her, of permanency” (157). Shadrack, then, effectively answers a question that Sula did not even think to ask, one concerning Chicken Little’s fate, and his answer somehow helps her and Nel to live with the consequences of their actions. At Chicken’s funeral, “They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay above-ground forever” (66). Shadrack thus assures Sula of the inability of death to conquer all in much the same way that Septimus provides Clarissa a similar security; however, Morrison’s relationship seems far more reciprocal, and Shadrack, in turn, does not exist in the same state of alienation that so fully traps Septimus.

The methods by which each man seeks to impose order upon chaos also reflect Shadrack’s more connected existence. In his isolated state, Septimus becomes enthralled by the “message hidden in the beauty of words” (Dalloway 88), and he accordingly tries to harness that power to write his own “revelations on the backs of envelopes” (24). Only Rezia, his wife, ever sees his messages, though, and while she does not understand them in the way that Septimus wants her to, she does, at least, think some of them “very beautiful” (148). Shadrack, however, spreads his message throughout Medallion by instituting National Suicide Day, a holiday that Katy Ryan describes as “a ‘sane’ institution to counter the insanity of war” (402). The holiday grows out of Shadrack’s struggle to “order and focus experience”; he realizes (as, of course, does Clarissa in Mrs. Dalloway) that it “was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both.” Subsequently, he decides, “if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free.” National Suicide Day operates, at first, as a rite, a representational exercise that Shadrack enacts on the third day of January each year by walking “through the Bottom down Carpenter’s Road with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other” (Sula 14). Gradually, Shadrack achieves his purpose and makes a formal acknowledgement of death a part of life as the people of Medallion absorb his message “into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (15). Morrison writes, “Easily, quietly, Suicide Day became a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio” (16).

For years, Shadrack continues to perform this ritual alone until a few other outcasts gradually join him (Sula 41). By novel’s end, though, Morrison takes the holiday beyond the symbolic. After Sula dies, Shadrack, as if mourning his one human connection, begins “to miss the presence of other people” (155). Though disheartened, he manages to take up his bell and rope and begin his pilgrimage yet again (158). Some combination of a winter thaw and a desire to look “at death in the sunshine” while “being unafraid” draws a record crowd to the parade, and by “the time Shadrack reached the first house, he was facing a line of delighted faces” (159). Their eager display, which frightens him from the beginning, culminates in tragedy as the group faces the “the tunnel they were forbidden to build” (161), a project the community once thought would bring new life to the Bottom but instead...
soured into a “leaf-dead promise” when the contractor would hire African American workers only for the most menial jobs (162). The participants, in their desire to “kill” the tunnel, “kill it all,” go down into it and, instead, lose their own lives (161-62). Lisa Williams interprets this final parade as “a protest against the violence of social hierarchy that refuses these black men work” (121), but Ryan takes the idea of protest a step further to suggest that the deaths fulfill the requirements for a “revolutionary suicide”: the individual deaths become subsumed into “a political protest in which identity is collective” (401). By provoking such response, Shadrack spreads his message far more successfully than does Septimus, for while Septimus touches only one woman, Shadrack changes the consciousness of an entire community.

Most obviously, though, Morrison challenges the concept of alienation by appraising the value of female friendship. She spoke of its potential in her interview with Claudia Tate:

Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before Sula. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in Sula. Relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they’re playing. This is not true of men. (157)

Morrison did not set out to explore the possibilities of women’s friendships and even told Tate, “I was half-way through the book before I realized that friendship in literary terms is a rather contemporary idea” (157). Nevertheless, the force of her revisioning lies in the relationship that she establishes between best friends Sula and Nel. In many ways, it resembles the childhood relationship between Clarissa and Sally when the two share a similarly non-sexual closeness while they sit, “hour after hour, talking in her [Clarissa’s] bedroom at the top of the house, talking about life, how they were to reform the world” (Dalloway 33).

Clarissa admires Sally for her daring, what she terms, “a sort of abandonment, as if she [Sally] could say anything, do anything; a quality much commoner in foreigners than in Englishwomen” (Dalloway 33). Clarissa values Sally not only for the daring that inspires her to run naked through the hall after forgetting her bath sponge, but also for her smaller violations. In one instance, Clarissa admires Sally’s willingness to experiment with flowers, to “cut their heads off” and make “them swim on the top of water in bowls” in a fashion that horrifies stodgy old Aunt Helena (34). The differences that Woolf establishes between the two girls must seem obvious to all onlookers in the novel because Peter Walsh, who notices practically nothing, thinks of Sally as “Clarissa’s greatest friend, always about the place, totally unlike her” (59).

Following—or rather surpassing—Woolf, Morrison also portrays her characters as different from one another. From girlhood, Sula exhibits a nature far more daring than Sally’s; for example, she persuades Nel to join her in confronting the bullies who loiter on Carpenter’s Road and prevent the girls from taking the shortest route home. When the boys block the gate to the path one day, Sula pulls Eva’s paring knife from her pocket and “pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge.” Morrison writes, “Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger” (54). Though Sula seems to have planned to cut off even more of her finger, the boys stare “open-mouthed at the wound.” Sula asks them, “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (54-55). Morrison similarly casts Nel as a sort of Clarissa figure in that her repressed mother has driven “her daughter’s imagination underground” (Sula 18), so that Nel, like Clarissa, has
become an “unimaginative” and “prudish” victim of what Peter calls “The death of the soul” (Dalloway 59). Largely because of Sula’s friendship, Nel finally finds the courage to dissociate from her mother, and Morrison writes that the two girls somehow complete each other. Their bond creates a “safe harbor of each other’s company” where they can “afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things” (Sula 55).

The intense friendships in both Woolf’s and Morrison’s novels contain at least the potential for romantic love. In Mrs. Dalloway, a crucial moment occurs as the two girls walk along the terrace at Bourton:

> She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it—a diamond, something infinitely precious, wrapped up, which, as they walked (up and down, up and down), she uncovered, or the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!—when old Joseph and Peter faced them. (35-36)

Williams speculates that such memories of her relationship with Sally allow Clarissa finally to “admit to herself that her feelings for Sally constitute the deepest, most exquisite passion of her life, and her mind’s avid descent into the past represents Clarissa’s wish to revisit that lost feeling” (86). While that seems true enough, within the confines of the novel, Clarissa looks back upon her relationship with Sally, much as she does her failed affair with Peter, as a temporary bond made possible only by the impetuousness of youth: “it had a quality which could only exist between women, between women just grown up. It was protective, on her side; sprang from a sense of being in league together, a presentiment of something that was bound to part them” (Dalloway 34). Just as old Joseph and Peter interrupt the moment that the girls share on the terrace, life and marriage do indeed part them, and Clarissa laments the loss of friendship more than anything else. She thinks, “The strange thing, on looking back, was the purity, the integrity, of her feeling for Sally” (34). While Clarissa remembers their kiss as “the most exquisite moment of her whole life,” it could also qualify as the most tragic, because it marks the point at which her only true friendship dies and Sally becomes just another potential lover that Clarissa must reject to preserve her solitude.

Although Morrison insisted during the Tate interview that there “is no homosexuality in Sula” (157), she nevertheless depicts a similarly climactic, if only symbolic, scene between Nel and Sula when the girls join together in what they call “grass play”:

> In concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig. At first Nel was content to do the same. But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. (58)

Rather than allowing this erotic “grass play” to move from the representation to the actual as Woolf does, Morrison metaphorically buries the potential for a sexual relationship between her two characters. When Nel’s twig breaks she throws the pieces into the depression with “a gesture of disgust” (58). Sula throws hers in as
well and, together, the two girls replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. Neither one had spoken a word” (59).

Shortly thereafter, the girls witness a literal death, Chicken Little’s drowning, the event that marks their entrance to adulthood and foreshadows their later destructive romantic relationships with men.

Clarissa’s relationships with men hardly seem more productive. Woolf makes it clear that Clarissa chooses to marry Richard because he presents a safe alternative to Peter, who thinks, “everything had to be shared; everything gone into” (Dalloway 8). With Richard, Clarissa can easily maintain what Peter terms her “impenetrability” (60), a quality that she thinks of as “a dignity in people; a solitude” that prevents a completely open connection to another person (120). In her marriage to Richard, she maintains the “little independence” that she thinks must exist “between people living together day in day out in the same house; which Richard gave her, and she him” (7-8). Clarissa’s choice leads scholars such as Hawthorn to speculate that Woolf disapproves of consuming passion “because it consumes” (51). In any case, Clarissa cuts herself off from the very possibility of a fulfilling (much less consuming) connection, and Woolf hints that Clarissa chooses such remoteness in her marriage not from some theoretical commitment to independence, but because of a perceived lack within herself: “She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together.” Because of this lack, Clarissa thinks that she has “failed” Richard (Dalloway 31), but, more importantly, that she has failed herself.

In her master’s thesis, Morrison speculates that the death of Clarissa’s sister, Sylvia, spurs her emotional withdrawal and that the effects of her detachment first appear in her relation-
that she had felt with Nel: "She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman" (121). With this discovery, Morrison saves Sula from a fate similar to the one that awaits Sally Seton when she marries a Manchester man who owns cotton mills, becomes Lady Sally Rosseter, and delights most in her "five enormous boys" (Dalloway 171).

After learning the lesson of women's primary intimacy with one another, Sula returns to Medallion and Nel's friendship. The two fall back into their easy relationship and former closeness; as Nel puts it, "Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself" (Sula 95). Morrison, though, subjects their friendship to a test far more difficult than the simple endurance of time and distance when Nel happens upon her husband and Sula "down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor" (105). Morrison said in her "Conversation" with Gloria Naylor that she wanted to establish that strong friendship and then "have one [of the women] do the unforgivable thing to see what that friendship was really made out of" (200). At first, it seems that the friendship is not made of very strong stuff at all, and Nel feels doubly deprived at the loss of both her husband and Sula "down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor" (105). Morrison said in her "Conversation" with Gloria Naylor that she wanted to establish that strong friendship and then "have one of the women] do the unforgivable thing to see what that friendship was really made out of" (200). At first, it seems that the friendship is not made of very strong stuff at all, and Nel feels doubly deprived at the loss of both her husband and best friend: "Here she was in the midst of it, hating it, scared of it, and again she thought of Sula as though they were still friends and talked things over. That was too much. To lose Jude and not have Sula to talk about it because it was Sula that he had left her for" (Sula 110).

Throughout the rest of the novel, Morrison deconstructs the affair in light of Sula and Nel's friendship. Ultimately, in the person of Sula, Morrison creates a character that ascribes to an alternative morality not all that different from the Bloomsbury sexual ethos that informed the behavior of Woolf's most intimate circle of friends.11 Morrison writes that Sula leads "an experimental life" (118), and has "no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments—no ego" (119). Morrison displays this Bloomsbury influence most prominently in Sula's reasoning about the affair:

She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They had always shared the affection of other people: compared how a boy kissed, what line he used with one and then the other. Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes, she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. (119)

Three years later, after learning that Sula has become gravely ill, Nel finally confronts her, "What about me? Why didn't you think about me? Didn't I count?" When Nel points out that Sula "didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away," Sula offers a shocking reply: "What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (144, 145).

By posing the radical possibility that women friends could and should share male lovers, even in the context of wedlock, Morrison intentionally creates and endorses an alternative to heteronormative romantic love based in jealous possession. As she told Naylor:

You see, if all women behaved like those two, or if the Sula point of view operated and women really didn't care about sharing these things, everything would just crumble—hard. If it's not about fidelity and possession and my pain versus yours, then how can you manipulate, how can you threaten, how can you assert power? I went someplace once to talk about Sula and there were some genuinely terrified...
men in the audience, and they walked out and told me why. They said, “Friendship between women?” Aghast. Really terrified. (200).

Like Morrison, Sula realizes that the world—or more singularly, Nel—cannot yet accept such a philosophy. On her deathbed, she tells Nel that after something, some violent event, turns the world upside down, “then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like” (146). After that, she fades into drugged, hazy memories of her own and Nel’s shared childhood, remembering “the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price” (147).

Sula then dies and realizes “that there was not going to be any pain” and that she “was not breathing because she didn’t have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.” The depth of her bond with Nel becomes apparent when, significantly, Sula thinks of Nel as she passes from this life and enters the next: “Well, I’ll be damned . . . it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel” (149).

Nel comes to appreciate Sula’s perspective, but only after Sula dies. As she returns from the funeral, Nel senses the presence of Sula’s spirit and finally realizes that while “all that time, I thought I was missing Jude,” she actually longed for Sula, her best friend, the other half of her soul. The acknowledgement of her loss causes her to cry out, “O Lord, Sula . . . girl, girl, girlgirlgirl” (174), and the two again merge, visually and textually, into the oneness of friendship as the sound of Nel’s lamentation fades away. Morrison describes Nel’s wail as “a fine cry—loud and long,” and notes that “it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174). Morrison, in her thesis, tellingly mentions an associated metaphor of Woolf’s and determines that “Big Ben, chopping the day into sections, is not time as change, but time as destroyer” (22). Although Morrison does not comment on it, Woolf represents Big Ben’s echoes as “leaden circles dissolved in the air” (Dalloway 4), an image that Morrison probably noticed. In Sula, Morrison takes those defunct circles and uses them to find a way to outwit time, not through suicide, as Mrs. Dalloway proposes, but through a friendship that survives death. The circles of Nel and Sula’s friendship do not spiral outward, to eventually dissolve like the sounds of Big Ben, but instead repeat upward and outward, endlessly throughout time like William Butler Yeats’s gyres. Through her friendship with Nel, Sula finally achieves the sort of immortality that the young Clarissa Dalloway believed possible before she detached from the world. Peter says of Clarissa’s abandoned belief:

It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe, or say that she believed (for all her scepticism), that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps. (153)

Morrison makes such an extension possible for Sula as Nel detects the presence of her spirit in the novel’s final pages, and a similar type of continuation perhaps exists for Clarissa even in her isolation, though by novel’s end she clearly has given up any hope or conscious desire for extraordinary intimacy. Peter says that Clarissa “had influenced him more than any person he had ever known” (Dalloway 153), and Sally similarly puts their friendship first when she “counted up her blessings” because she “had owed Clarissa an enormous amount. They had been friends, not acquaintances, friends” (191, 188). Perhaps, in this way, Clarissa can similarly outwit time by continuing to inspire the same admiration in others that Peter and Sally feel ultimately feel for her. Indeed, she continues to exist and to touch readers, for Morrison taps into her power and transforms it in Sula, an exploration of intimacy that proves Woolf’s theory: one book can clearly continue another.
Notes

1. Williams mentions that Morrison's thesis deals with "Mrs. Dalloway and the theme of alienation," and adds, "It is, however, important to point out that as a mature novelist herself, Morrison went on to rewrite and re-envision Woolf's idea of isolation" (2). Morrison's descriptions of other alienated literary characters also indicate where her sympathies lie: "The characters created by Thomas Wolfe, T. S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway, to mention a few, evoke images of solitary, alienated people who, together, form a community of the isolated" ("Treatment" 1). She tellingly suggests that even isolated characters form some sort of community with each other.

2. Morrison told Elizabeth Farnsworth in a 1998 Online NewsHour interview concerning Paradise that isolation "carries the seeds of its own destruction." Moreover, Richard Misner even says in that novel, "Isolation kills generations. It has no future" (Paradise 210).

3. In comparison to the veritable wealth of criticism about the Faulkner/Morrison connection, only Williams has attempted a book-length examination of Woolf and Morrison. Indeed, much of my own thinking about this essay grew out of connections I first made between Morrison's reading of Quentin Compson in her thesis and her own Song of Solomon. Her sensitivity to such comparisons also warrants notice. For example, in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, she emphatically remarked, "I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like in that sense" (152).

4. Christian suggests that Morrison wrote her thesis on Faulkner because there was no such thing as African American literature—studying Faulkner was what they call in the music business, a "cover" (486), and goes on to outline intersections between Morrison's and Woolf's lives and fictions. Most notably, she observes that their fictions resist stereotypes such as the "mammy in the Big House" (487), create novels "bracketed by war" (489), explore new forms for the novel (491), illustrate the disconnect between the inner lives and outer worlds of characters (492), connect their characters' belief systems to nature (496), and, most importantly, always keep "pushing against" what they had already learned (497).

5. Hawthorn does not actually use the term "alienation" in his discussion of dissatisfaction, but the term's meaning clearly informs his argument. Rather, he makes reference to Georg Lukács's criticism of Modernist writing "because in it the interaction of social forces remains unseen and characters 'act past one another' " (93). This acting "past one another," as Hawthorn relates it to Mrs. Dalloway, functions as the end result of self-interest and alienation.

6. For my thinking about such continuation, I am indebted to Barrett.

7. Barrett points to the similarities between Shadrack and Septimus. I shift her focus slightly to examine how Morrison revises the figure to emphasize his communal connection. As Williams notes, "Morrison creates characters, who, while alienated, can also find acceptance and solace within the surrounding African-American community. Woolf's characters, on the other hand, are usually completely alone, without any type of community or often even friends" (2).

8. Morrison works with a similar theme in her later novel, Love. Although Love explores another friendship between two women, Christine and Heed Cosey, Morrison, at least theoretically, extends her belief in the power of friendship to include men as well, as long as the bond forms early enough. Morrison's ghostly narrator, the "L" or "Love" of the title says about early friendships, "If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one" (199).

9. In Love, Christine Cosey says that her marriage built on a desire "so instant it felt like fate" made for a terrible marriage: "As couplehood goes, it had its moments. As marriage goes, it was ridiculous" (93). Williams points out that Morrison deliberately inverts the notion of friends leaning on each other when she writes that Nel and Sula use "each other to grow on" (Williams 109; Sula 52). According to Williams, this quality makes the friendship, "in itself, subversive" because the girls use it to replace "an unsatisfactory mother/daughter bond as well as future heterosexual relations" (109).

10. In Love, Morrison's female characters are aware of their own roles in sacrificing their friendship for love. As Christine tells Heed, "it's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder" (185).

11. In "Clive Bell and Duncan Grant," Garnett alludes to the policy of "deferment," a term that Bell adopted and popularized for the group's policy of refusing to acknowledge the tension generated when sexual relationships between individual members posed a conflict. Garnett says of the triangular relationship between Clive and Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant: "Between Clive and Duncan there was not the faintest show of jealousy—indeed it seems absurd to mention such a thing" (221). In his essay titled "Bloomsbury," Bell describes the basis of this policy as a shared "taste for discussion in pursuit of truth and a contempt for conventional ways of thinking and feeling—contempt for conventional morals if you will" (119-20). Morrison further underlines this Bloomsbury connection by writing that Sula, "like any artist with no art form . . . became dangerous" (121).


Tate, Claudia. "Toni Morrison." *Taylor-Guthrie* 156-70.


