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Toni Morrison's Sula: An Image of a New World Woman

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *Sula* chronicles a community in which black women dominate public and private life. Morrison's point in her description of her protagonist supersedes questions of gender and race. *Sula* is conceived outside the constraints ordinarily felt by women in her community. Her status as woman is only a small part of how she perceives herself and ultimately how she is perceived by readers. *Sula* is simply too much of an enigma to be truly representative of either group in many ways. *Sula* goes in describing the extent to which one woman's rejection of every available social script generates tangible, even fatal, public tension despite any real or perceived limitations imposed by her family, her community, or the era in which she is depicted. *Sula* does not put any limits upon herself. A young woman coming of age in a rural Ohio community during the period between the world wars, *Sula* is marked both literally and figuratively by her singularity of thought and action. She leaves her hometown for ten years. During which she travels across the country and attends college. When she returns she refuses to maintain the family house in the manner of her mother and grandmother before her. Her sexual exploits do not lead her to a state of monogamy, shared domesticity, or even steady companionship. She had no centre, no speck around which to grow. She was completely free of ambition with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego. Thus she is a new world woman in true sense.

Key Words: Morrison, *Sula*, Image, Women, Exploit.

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Introduction

Toni Morrison has been experimenting with fiction from the beginning of a literary career with *The Bluest Eye*. It is useful to recognise Morrison's expertise in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, two Masters of experimentation in the novel. Morrison's second novel *Sula* is set in a fictional town of Medallion, Ohio. *Sula* was enthusiastically received by literary critics

and reviewers.

Nominated for the National Book award this rich and moving novel traces the lives of two black heroines from their growing up together in a small Ohio town through their sharply divergent paths of womanhood, to their ultimate confrontation and reconciliation. The one, Nel Wright chooses to remain in the place of her birth, to marry, to raise a family and to become a pillar of the tightly knit black community. The Other, Sula Peace rejects all that Nel has accepted. She escapes to college and submerges herself in the city life. When she returns to her roots it is a rebel, a mocker and a wanton sexual seductress. Both Women must suffer the consequences of their choices, both must decide if they can afford to harbour the love they have for each other and both combine to create an unforgettable rendering of what it means and costs to exist and survive as a black woman in America. Hailed by critics for its stunning language and its original, honest depiction of the black way of life after the Civil War, Sula is a lyrical blend of myth and magic as real as a history lesson and as enchanting as a fable.

Sula is a tale of rebel and conformist in which the conformity is dictated by the social inhabitants of the Bottom and even the rebellion gains strength from the community disapproval. New York Times Book Review contributors Sarah Blackburn contended however that the book is 'too vital and reach' to be consigned to the category of allegory. (Blackburn;1973). Morrison's "extravagantly beautiful doomed characters are locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity, yet they are enormously, aching alive," wrote Blackburn. "And this book is about them and about how their beauty is drained back and frozen - is a howl of love and rage, playful and funny as well as hard and bitter." (Blackburn;1973).

Yardley stated: "what gives this terse, imaginative novel its genuine distinction is the quality of Toni Morrison's prose. Sula is admirable enough as a study of its title character... but its real strength lies in Morrison's writing which at times has the resonance of poetry and is precise, vivid and controlled throughout." (Yardley;1974). Turner also claimed that in Sula "Morrison evokes her verbal magic occasionally by lyric descriptions that carry the reader deep into the soul of the character. Equally effective, however, is the art of narrating action in lean pros that uses adjectives cautiously while creating memorable vivid images." (Turner;1978).

Morrison stated that, "I want my books to always be about something that is important to me and the subjects that are important in the world are the same ones that have always been important." (Morrison;1974).

The effects of racism upon black American life function as a major ingredient in all of Morrison's novels as she explores the differences between the races' humanity and cultural values. Racism in all its myriad forms whether blatant or subliminal, is a part of every scene.

Sula with every aspect of the novel expressing some colour of racism. Even the laughter of the Bottom is a laughter born of pain -a series of cruel jokes directed against the laughers themselves.

"I always thought of Sula as quite essentially black, metaphysically, black if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is New World black and New World Woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational, daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out of the house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female,"says Toni Morrison.(Morrison;1974)

Sula chronicles a community in which black women dominate public and private life, narrating the intracultural, racial sites from which black women speak. Yet Morrison's point in her description of a protagonist supersedes questions of gender and race. Since Sula Peace is conceived outside of the constraints ordinarily felt by the women in her community, her status as a woman is only a small part of how she perceives herself and ultimately how she is perceived by readers. The same goes for race. While the near absence of whites in the novel forces a recognition of difference within race, Sula's blackness as Morrison defines it, also transcends race altogether. Sula is simply too much of an enigma to be truly representative of either group. As Morrison notes Sula's "new world black" is more than moxy and melanin. It is a jazz-inspired, something individual, fundamental and internal, manifesting itself in a resistance to existing social mores and a cultivation of the untried and the unknown.

Despite any real or perceived limitations imposed by her family, her community, or the era in which she is depicted, Sula does not put any limits upon herself. Still her quite essential blackness isolates her from a community that enacts an utterly antithetical aesthetics. Sula becomes instructive to readers precisely because she is deemed destructive by the other characters in the novel. A young woman coming of age in a rural Ohio community during the period between the world wars Sula is marked both literally and figuratively by her singularity of thought and action. She leaves her hometown for ten years, during which she travels across the country and attends college. When she returns, she refuses to maintain the family house in the manner of her mother and grandmother before her. Her sexual exploits do not lead her to a state of monogamy, shared domesticity, or even steady companionship; with one memorable exception, Sula's interactions with men are consciously finite. And despite her status as a protagonist - the novel does, after all bear her name - Sula occupies a relatively small amount of page space, even dying a full two chapters before the novel's close. This comparative absence from a text that purports to be about her, coupled with the moral slipperiness of her character, makes Sula both difficult to like and difficult to know.

Two incidents in the novel figure prominently in Sula's development: the first conversation in which she overhears her mother. Hannah, conclude, "... I love Sula. I just don't like her": (Sula;42), the second, her inadvertent participation in the drowning of one of her peers, a young boy named Chicken Little. Morrison sums up the overall effect of these incidents in one passage: "...she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, hers was an experimental life ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up though the stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exercised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on, the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no centre, no speck around which to grow. She was completely free of ambition with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments - no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself be consistent with herself."(Sula;62).

Here, Morrison provides a textual definition for her notion of "new world woman." The passage describes how Sula's personality has taken shape and ironically, in the shapelessness of this shape, the paradox of Sula is revealed. The foundation of Sula's character is, a lack of foundation, a structurelessness that affects every thought, every action, and every interaction that Sula has. Formed of a creative formlessness, Sula seeks only her own council, living but indifferent to or uninterested in any kind of quotidian morality. She is, in the truest sense of the word, self-ish. Since she has no ambition, she does not project herself or her actions, into the future, which suggests that she has no sense of, or sensitivity to, cause and effect. Since she does not play the events of her life into a larger context, or even consider them in relation to one another, each experience stands alone. Indeed, to verify herself would be to sum up, to suggest that there is an ego that anchors or fixes her. She has no such thing.

Faced with such a protagonist, many readers are discomfited. It is not easy to identify with Sula, and when, in the second half of the novel, she sleeps with her best friend's husband, some readers might wash their hands of her altogether. "How could she do that to her best friend?" The question is instructive for a few reasons. First it reveals how difficult it is to accept Sula as a protagonist one assumes that she is the focus because of the book's title but many readers find it easier to identify with Nel-the best friend, the compassionate woman, the good girl. Certainly, Nel feels much textual space as Sula, if not more. Second, if one accepts that the book is about Sula, one also assumes that Sula will either be good in the traditional sense or will at the very least grow and change and gain self-knowledge as the novel progresses. This transformation does not happen. Instead, Sula is developmentally complete by the middle of the

novel, she does not question herself and she has no revelations or regrets, yet she manages to propel the story forward by the sheer unpredictability of her actions. These attributes make Sula heroic. She contextualizes herself by herself, her disinterest in children, a spouse, a job and a home is, ultimately a gesture towards creative agency and authority that the other characters in the novel do not make. On the other hand, Sula's individual, as Morrison conceives it, cannot help but collide with other characters and with the practicalities of the narrative itself.

Although members of the Bottom community chastise Sula for failing to live up to their notions of womanhood and blackness, Sula does not see herself in conjunction with any of their ideals. This distinction is important. Since neither of these readings can completely contain or account for Sula's uniqueness. In keeping with the tenor of a protagonist, Morrison's narrative tactics in *Sula* tend toward the abstract and unobtrusive; Morrison draws Sula's character largely by suggestion, indirection and absence. To setup the story, Morrison opens the text with a kind of prelude, pointing out the important characters and preparing readers for the events to follow. In these four pages, Morrison establishes a tone that encourages the reader to view Sula as a parable; the reader senses that there is a moral or spiritual lesson to be learned from Sula's fundamental abstraction from people and place and that this lesson may be atypical.

Outfitting Sula with birthmark allows Morrison to strengthen Sula's connection to the natural world and lends her character a certain biblical resonance, complicating the dialogue between good and evil that the text teases out. Morrison also employs two characters as foils, casting Sula in bas relief against Shadrack and Nel, on the one hand and the rest of the Bottom community, on the other. And last Morrison invokes the Supernatural, exposing, in the second half of the novel, the irrational influence Sula claims over her community and the formal limitations that an otherwise realistic narrative imposes upon Sula's character. Nel emerges as the other key player in this scenario, assuming narrative responsibility where Sula shuns it. Sula's resistance to the notion of progress complicates her role as a protagonist and compels Morrison to relieve her of her formal duties.

Shadrack and Sula have one significant interaction. Sula visits his house on the day that Chicken Little dies and, in her haste to depart, leaves behind the purple and white belt to her. Shadrack saves the belt, a memento of "his visitor, his company, his guest, his a social his woman, his daughter, his friend." (Sula p. 157). Here, Morrison verifies the implicit, essential bond between the two characters and, in their belief interaction, makes their differences more readily apparent.

Both Shadrack and Sula are outcasts. Both witness death first hand, Shadrack in the war and Sula at home. And perhaps because of their experiences, both face their own morality and the precarious construction of the self in direct, disturbing ways. As a child, Sula learns to

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confront fear head on. She cuts off her fingertip in front of a group of boys who are terrorizing Nel to show them that if she could do such a thing to herself, she could easily do something equally terrifying to them. By adulthood, fear is effectively exercised from her life. Her ten year absence from the Bottom fine tunes an already thriving existential wanderlust, ultimately allowing her to sustain self-exploration while staying physically fit. By her late twenties, Sula no longer needs physical upheaval to prompt internal quest. Conversely, Shadrack tries to keep his thoughts at bay, and acting out his fears eases his mind. The best he can do is control fear by allotting it a certain time and place and, in that way, imposing order on the disorderliness of existence. Shadrack clings and Sula releases performing for the towns people two familiar narratives; the lunatic and the evil women.

Shadrack's assiduous isolation serves as a silencing, protective shield around his person, while Sula's independence, because it manifests itself randomly and sporadically, lays her open to the Bottom's scrutiny. Shadrack's character helps define the "new world women" by confirming that Sula is neither mad nor asocial.

The birth mark is also interpreted in Sula as a copperhead, a tadpole, a scary black thing and the ashes of Sula's mother, whom Sula watches burn to death in the backyard. This physical inscription identifies Sula as touched by something out of the ordinary, perhaps menacing, perhaps powerful. A natural, biological stamp, the mark appears over her eye, signifying a break in the sequence of her face, which alters the nature of hereye. Sula's birthmark has biblical resonance. Sula shares social isolation, ostracism and a profound absence of guilt. When Nel visit Sula on her deathbed and asks Sula why she slept with her husband Sula says, "Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody risky you don't get it nothing for it." (Sula p. 144-145).

Sula is a kind of vagabond leaving the Bottom for a full decade to wander through the country before returning home as an adult. Even in the Bottom, Sula is best classified as a drifter; she lives day-to-day resisting employment, companionship, even assistance, until she has no one and nothing left. For Sula, then, her birthmark could denote a double mark against her, yet she bears it as a mark of liberation. Sula segregates her-self from the laws of her community which, in turn, gives her the chance to write her own life; Gods sentence becomes self-authorship.

Nel is Sula's other foil in the novel, and her task is far greater than Shadrack's. As Sula's childhood confidant, Nel functions much like a sister, someone whose presence Sula never fundamentally questions. Morrison herself has noted that each character lacks what the other has; "Nel doesn't know about herself. Even at the end she doesn't know. She is just beginning... Sula on the other hand, knows all there is to know about herself because she examines herself...but

she has a trouble making a connection with other people and just feeling that lovely sense of accomplishment of being closed in a very strong way.”(Sula;149). There is no question that Sula and Nel complement each other, yet their characters are fundamentally, finally discreet. Sula dies without ever approaching the kind of intimacy of which Nel is capable and, although Nel does eventually gain insight into Sula’s world, it is achieved only decades after Sula’s death. Morrison has stated that, in Sula, she was “interested in doing a very old worn-out idea, which was to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms.”(Sula;181).

The differences between Sula and Nel are tested and the extent of Sula’s otherness made manifest. As an adult, married with three children, Nel is utterly contained by the Bottom’s sensibility. Morrison reflects; “Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignore them.”(Sula; 83). Armed with a college education and an edgy cynicism, Sula is an outcast from the start. Her status as a woman without a man and a woman without children simply does not translate into a life that the Bottom understands. Sula’s grandmother Eva speaks for the whole community when she tells her granddaughter to have some babies, that it will settle her. To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not prerequisites for selfhood. Her own business - the business of being, of living is not dictated by family or community.

When Sula dies in the fall of a thirtieth year, the people of the Bottom are left without a direct, evil force with which to contend. Her death described as a slip of water, coincides with an early frost which, ruins harvest and renders folks housebound. With environmental and communal warmth frozen even Teapot’s Mama, who had become doting after she feared that Sula had knocked her five year old down the steps, returns to the beating her son.

While Morrison’s novels are full of ghosts, magic and even in case of Song of Solomon’s Pilate, a woman born without of the naval, Sula’s post death utterances a theatre push the “new world women” into another genre, a different narrative landscape. It is the only scene in the novel in which this type of moment occurs and as such, it is significant.

As the anarchistic, antagonistic protagonist, Sula’s character is pushed into a modern gothic, predicting the end of the world, dying in solitude and poverty in an empty old house, and speaking from beyond the grave. Only by eluding the formal containment of narrative realism, the shrugging off the responsibilities of novelistic form, does Sula become the “new world women” of Morrison’s vision.

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