

Essay: Toni Morrison's *Sula*

The story of Sula and Nel is about the intense friendship of two women; their estrangement; and then, their eventual reconciliation in death. However, I also see this as a story about the tragic deformation of a personality, which is the result of the pressures of an oppressed society. The culmination of this oppression being manifested in a personality type which is more vulnerable than most; one which demands the exploration and the release of inner expression; one which is driven by the need for creativity. I see that the source of Sula's restlessness comes from not having a way to express and to release her inner self. I disagree that, as some have said, she needed to complete herself in her relationship with Nel.

Man has an inherent need for artistic expression, whether it be through literature, art, or music. From the earliest of man's history, there is evidence of this need left by prehistoric man in the form of cave paintings. Though most people are content simply to enjoy the creations of others, there are those few who are driven in their need and desire to create. This is the person I see in Sula. She was one of those rare people with a gifted imagination coupled with a raging restlessness.

Sula was born into a community of an oppressed people and of distorted surroundings within her own household. Sula was left a good deal to herself. She occupied her time daydreaming and exploring her own thoughts. She was, as the speaker describes her (and Nel), "solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them" (51). For Sula, there simply wasn't the stimulation she craved. For someone with an active mind, this to me is like a form of torture.

The backdrop of Sula's childhood was a canvas of strangeness that shaped her own strangeness. She seemed to be awash in a sea of disorder. She was surrounded by men who had given up their lives to self-indulgence: Plum, a dope addict; Tar Baby, an alcoholic; a grandfather, BoyBoy, who had deserted his family; and the deweys, boys who were left to indulge themselves without much structure or discipline. There was a constant coming and going of transient people, newly weds and other boarders at the house. And, finally, there was her grandmother, Eva, who was an eccentric woman; and her mother, who gave herself freely to men. Both women seemed to be distant from Sula and had other preoccupations.

Much of the strangeness found in the Peace household, I feel, is the result of white oppression. It would take a separate essay to expand this idea, but in short, I believe the effects come from centuries of degradation under slavery and the perverse destruction of the black slave's family unit.

Both of the Peace women, Eva and Hannah, catered exclusively to men. Eva was obviously partial to her son Plum, and later took in three neglected young boys, the deweys. Sula witnessed her mother making love to almost any man, and she did things to make men feel special. So, I think the message early in Sula's life was that a woman's life didn't matter as much as a man's life did. The speaker explains, "Each (Sula and Nel) had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" (52).

Sula and Nel's attachment to each other grew out of the alienation each experienced in their family surroundings. Each girl was different from other children their own ages, so both had a need to communicate with someone whose mental process was similar to their own. The similarities in their situations, then, provided them with a common bond. These isolated daydreamers found in the other a release. One was the other's pallet, and there was a mutual, unspoken understanding between them. I don't see them as opposites who needed the other to complete what they didn't have. Nel had a stronger, more stable personality, and she lacked Sula's driving force for expression. But there were similarities in their thought patterns, and the same desire to explore and to deviate from conventional behavior. This is the glue that bonded them together.

It was Sula's driving force that made her more vulnerable than Nel, and more susceptible to the distortions of this oppressed society. Nel's stability allowed her to "fit in" to society's structure easier. After Sula left, Nel missed Sula's companionship, but Nel was capable of diverting her mind and conforming to the needs of husband and children. This made her less susceptible to the distortions of her community. Also, Nel's background wasn't as bizarre as Sula's, which allowed her to become a more "normal" member of the community.

The unusually strange events of Sula's childhood probably would have an adverse affect on most any child's personality. But, I think these strange events would have a more disastrous effect on a delicate personality, such as Sula's. At a very young and vulnerable age, she witnessed her grandmother set fire to her own son; she was the cause of a young boy's death; she heard her mother tell a friend that she didn't like Sula; she experienced a variety of strange people in and around her home; she watched the horrid death of her mother; and she observed the unfaithfulness of probably every man in the community. The speaker tells us, "the first experience (Hannah's remark) taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second (Chicken Little's death) that there was no self to count on either" (118). Thus, there was no one in which she could place trust, to serve as a kind of anchor. Because of these things, Sula never grew beyond a certain point; "she had no center, no speck around which to grow" (119).

Sula tried to find completeness in others: friendships and lovers. But, she wasn't successful in finding it. However, going to bed with men "was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow. She had not always been aware that it was sadness that she yearned for" (122). This statement means to me that she had a need to express all the sadnesses that lived within her which she had experienced during her life. I think this is an indication of a need for creative expression. These are similar feelings of why poets write, painters paint, and musicians compose. Art forms are based more on misery and sadness than on joy and happiness.

The intensive relationship between Nel and Sula as children was vital for the release and development of their searching, creative minds. Nel's need eventually lessened as she took on a more adult role and marriage. I don't believe she outgrew the need for companionship with Sula, but the intensity had changed character. I think Sula also outgrew the childhood relationship, and her craving, thirsting mind had to search further; but it was never satisfied. She was just as much a captive of her own restlessness as others were in their defined roles.

Sula's need was to create. That she never found a way for this release was ultimately her undoing. But the responsibility of her not being able to discover and find that need, was the responsibility of the larger society and its destructive oppression upon Sula's society. The community lived virtually at the survival level and had few of the comforts common in white society. Men were robbed of dignity due to chronic joblessness. And, of course, the effects of slavery were still an open wound. Eva was only a generation away from the so-called "end" of slavery. All members of the community were affected and were victims of the oppression from white society, but Sula's personality reflected the distortions like a magnifying glass. In her was embodied the ultimate distortion of her society; concentrated and personified.