
The Voice and the Identity

Toni Morrison novels famously give voice to a black political, social, and moral conscience. Her novels deal primarily with the issues and concerns of black heritage and future and all the triumphs and tragedies of power and identity in between. Morrison uses the very processes of writing and characterization as a tool of negotiation of power and identity in her novel *Sula*. Her racial and political explorations can be effectively deepened and complicated for the reader by considering her language as a tool of black agency.

"Before [Shadrack] on a tray was a large tin plate divided into three triangles. In one triangle was rice, in another meat, and in the third stewed tomatoes . . . Shadrack stared at the soft colors that filled these triangles: the lumpy whiteness of rice, the quivering blood tomatoes, the grayish-brown meat. All their repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the triangles - a balance that soothed him, transferred some of its equilibrium to him. Thus reassured that the white, the red and the brown would stay where they were - would not explode or burst forth from their restricted zones - he suddenly felt hungry and looked around for his hands" (pg. 8).

The divided meal Morrison describes here captures the simple conceptions of race and race relations in the United States that have long existed in place of any deep understanding. In Shadrack's plate the browns, whites, and reds (or, crudely, the African-Americans, the Caucasian-Americans, and the Native Americans) exist in perfect balance when separated and contained without opportunity to interact. The balance gives Shadrack some ease, but such balance should not be read as a support of segregation. Shadrack is a sick and mentally confused man and only because of his weakness is the balance soothing. Morrison makes explicit the image of each of these separate triangles as being relatively undesirable as they exist on their own, "All their repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the triangles." On their own, each triangle is an incomplete and "repugnant" meal. Separated, they are no less wretched to eat, but their balance gives Shadrack a false sense of their edibility. Considering the triangles as separation of race, such containment gives nothing but a falsely copacetic sense of racial relations. The food may be separated by barriers, but it will all come to interact once inside Shadrack. Similarly, there may be racial barriers in the United States, but there is never a lack of interaction. The containments and barriers try to define a sense of appropriate place. Racial tensions and conventions as they have been defined in the United States cannot be contained by physical barriers, however. This pervasiveness of racial conventions is a major influence on Morrison's creations in this novel.

With these false barriers, a sense of place is created for the characters of *Sula* in a place called the Bottom. The Bottom's very foundation as a black town is a result of interaction with whites

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

who promised that the Bottom, ironically located on the top of a hill, is ideal because it is "the bottom of heaven - best land there is" (pg. 5). The Bottom proves to be a largely worthless land area and the decay and lack of value of the town is constant throughout the novel, with the novel opening and closing on the destruction and end of the town. Stylistically, opening the novel on this sense of decay helps define the tone of loss in the novel which reverberates most devastatingly when Shadrack's promise of permanency--- that is, his comment to Sula, "Always"--- goes long forgotten and unrealized. Morrison denies permanency to the town as a means of denying permanency to a sense of home. Home is defined through people and emotions, not through space. For the black people of the Bottom, even when they get to the top (in the sense that they are above the whites in location), they are still at the "bottom." Living high above in a place called the Bottom offers a confused sense of place in the world. Such a confusion of place drives racial tensions in the United States, and the tensions of the characters in Sula. Part of the misery of Sula is her loss of sense of place. She disappears for ten years, finding no home in any city and returning to the Bottom, not because it was a home to her, but because it was the last of her options. Helene Wright, the mother of Nel Wright, also characterizes this confused sense of place. Her confusion does not rest in where she calls her physical home, but rather, where she calls her societal place. After receiving harsh words and treatment from a white train conductor, "Like a street pup that wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before", Helene smiled. Smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor" (pg. 21). Helene smiles out of a sense of submission, trying to appeal to the white male conductor for approval, almost as an apology for her being a black female. The simile Morrison uses is especially effective because the comparison of Helene's actions to that of a puppy highlights the response as being automatic and even dumb, a symbol of her internalization of submission. Her very proper style and mannerisms also act as an apology for her Creole, free-to-be-black inheritance of which she is ashamed. This confusion of place in society does not go unchecked by those who are in the position to give her a place - the two black soldiers who saw her submissive smile on the train "looked stricken" (pg. 21) and the people of Medallion effectively changed her name to Helen in their pronunciation (pg. 18). Changing Helene to Helen makes Helene more ordinary and gives her a sense of place, allowing her to belong to these people. This concern with Helene's name is only one part of a focus on the constructions, meanings and origins of names as a major tool for commentary in Sula.

Names have long held a mythological importance in societies as reflecting and affecting the fates and personalities of those given them. Names for African-Americans are that much more important because of the roots of slavery which often denied the freedom to take and give names at the enslaved people's own discretion. Last names for enslaved people were usually taken from their master's last name, denying any sense of genuine lineage or shared familial identity. Additionally, enslaved people were generally given Christian names, all but erasing the African naming traditions and rituals which gave special meaning to newborn individuals for the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

rest of their lives. As a testament to the pervasive racism that informed the institution of slavery, enslaved people were also at times given names that would otherwise be reserved only for barn animals, such as Jumper or Milky. This history of name denial and perversion is important to understanding the tool of naming in *Sula*. The book uses names as an act of resistance to give back to black individuals their fates and personalities that the naming tradition grants them. Interestingly, Morrison also uses names as a tool to represent racial conventions and her characterization of and commentary on them.

The importance of names is evident in the very title of the novel. Sula is an essential character, and much of the content of the book is framed around her, but it would be impossible to say that there are not other characters that are as central to the book as Sula is. Entire sections and chapters are devoted to the lives of Shadrack, Eva, Hannah, Helene and especially Nel. Though the novel is written in the voice of an omniscient third-person narrator, it shifts into Shadrack's perception of reality (though remaining in third-person) in his major section (pg. 11) and it most notably shifts to a first-person inner dialogue narration during the scene in which Nel catches Jude and Sula. The fluidity in narrative voices and perception is a narrative method that has appeared in Western literature before Morrison, but its use in *Sula* functions specifically to reflect the communal nature of narrative that is common to the African-American aesthetic of call and response, in which the speaker invites the listeners to become active listeners and thus speakers as well. With such varying focus on characters, why then is the novel named solely for Sula? I argue that the title is such not because it is a suggestion that the character Sula is the most important, but that the title is Sula because of the meaning of the name.

"Sula" is a North African name meaning "peace." Essentially, Sula Peace's name means "Peace Peace" and the repetition highlights the importance of the meaning, working itself as a sort of chant that the tombstones of the same name read as to Nel (pg. 171). Sula's character, upon her return as an adult to the Bottom, is maligned as a devil. According to the town's folk, "...in their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and the fourth explained Sula" (pg. 118). The town regarded Sula as immoral, without a sense of purpose or place. She was a pariah in the town because nothing mattered to her and she was thus a dangerous threat to every relation and institution. But in their inability to understand her and in their fear of her (and even in their hatred of her), the people of Sula's town were able to define themselves. They sought to live in opposition to her in every way, and in this, they became more moral and kind and considerate. The threat of Sula gave the people a sense of morality and commitment to their relations and town. It brought them peace, as her name and the title suggests.

Nel Wright, Sula's best friend, also carries a name that Morrison loads with suggestions. Sula and Nel can be read as two halves of one whole person. Eva's comment to Nel during Nel's visit to Eva's old-age home suggests that inseparability of the two, "You. Sula. What's the

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

difference?" (p. 168). Nel's last name may suggest then that she was the "right" half of the one person that Sula and Nel made up - that she was the moral, reasonable half. But to accept that is to accept the demonization of Sula as the immoral, unreasonable half. Sula instead functions to transcend the limited conceptions of "right" that the town's people and white, Christian society have created for black women. Nel is "right" then in the sense that she is the black female as the pigeonhole allows her to be, not necessarily as she ought to be. "Now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways" (pg. 120). Sula is dramatized as a tragic heroine because she could not find a way to function in her transcendence of her role, but that does not mean that transcending the limited societal role of the black female is not the ideal. It is at the end of the novel that Nel recognizes her sense of loss as a sorrow for losing Sula, not Jude or the life Nel had with him. It is with this recognition that she can finally mourn for her true loss, and give voice to the real sorrow. Giving voice to black femininity is essential in *Sula* and it is here that Nel's surname takes on its other profound suggestion, "write."

In a twisted bit of comedy and surrealism, Morrison creates the three Deweys - three young black youths taken in by Eva, Sula's grandmother, and all named Dewey by her. The Deweys become a trinity, three persons identifying as one, and in this sense, their shared name accomplishes a sense of family. But the shared identity limits them, as the Deweys never grow to become individuals, and indeed Morrison denies them even growth in size and mind, "They had been forty-eight inches tall for years now, and while their size was unusual it was not unheard of. The realization was based on the fact that they remained boys in mind" (pg. 84). Denied individuality from the start, the Deweys never develop it on their own because they have been mentally crippled by their name association. With the Deweys, Morrison reconfirms the sense of shared identity that is important to names, as well as the fate and personality that is determined by names. Because the Deweys share a name, they share the one thing that has the power to differentiate them, and thus they lack a difference. Morrison thus emphasizes the importance of name and individuality through this trio of one.

Though his appearance is brief, Chicken Little plays an important role in defining the lives and personalities of Sula and Nel. Sula's accidental killing of Chicken Little and Nel's silence about it are major factors in their development as conscious, moral figures. Chicken Little's name is reminiscent of the demeaning barn animal names given to blacks stemming from the institution of slavery. Morrison allows Chicken Little to be demeaned with such a name in order to represent the continued presence of racist ideologies that are so pervasive that they have actually become internalized by blacks themselves, who are the ones who gave this little boy his name. The name suggests more than a history of slavery. It is a name designed around the stereotypical racial convention of the pickaninny, a black youth who is pictured as primitive, filthy, ignorant, and ultimately expendable. Starting in the time of slavery and throughout the early 20th century, popular songs and literature in America included the depiction of filthy pickaninnies, always in the woods, out in fields, near rivers or some other such location (in order

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

to represent them as primitive and animal-like), being killed or otherwise hurt or insulted. The death of Chicken Little buys into the convention of the pickaninny as filthy (he picks his nose throughout the scene), animal-like (his death is a drowning) and inconsequential (the expendable boy is collected by a white man who has no consideration for his body, and the truth of his death is silenced). Morrison recreates the cruel convention of the pickaninny in order to destroy it. The characters of the story may not give much consideration to his death, but the narrator treats the scene with a level of horror so as to restore to the reader the importance of the life of the individual who is more than the racial convention he follows. Morrison crafts the scene with a delicacy that preserves the innocence of Chicken Little, who sails away to his death unknowingly, emitting a "bubbly laughter" (pg. 61) which reverberates as a disturbing irony in the air.

Racial stereotypes and conventions fuel the characterizations of the major players throughout *Sula*. The hypersexual black female is a damaging stereotype that stems from the days of slavery when black females were seen as complicit sexual demons for their relations with white slave masters (this of course ignores the lack of choice most of these enslaved women had in their sexual relations). The hypersexual black female threatens society as a home-wrecker and an unstoppable individual force. She breaks down the phallus of the political and moral authority of the American patriarchy. Considering especially the already existent demasculization of the males in the book who are characterized by drug-addictions, mental afflictions, and economic ineffectiveness, the hypersexual black female's treatment of the phallus of authority as nothing more than the sexual and trivial penis is that much more destructive. The Peace women and particularly Sula are created out of this racial convention not as a means of supporting it, but as a means of redefining and ultimately squashing it. By characterizing their hypersexuality, Morrison gives it meaning. These women are no longer the simple stereotype that they follow but are individuals with motivations, feelings, and reasonability. Eva's hypersexuality is particularly interesting because it defies the other racial convention out of which she seems to be crafted - the Mammy. The Mammy is a common image of black femininity (or lack thereof) in American history. Big, bold, and strong as can be, the Mammy was an aggressive mother figure with her own children, but a loving caretaker to all others (including her white masters). In order to fit this aggressive and strong ideal, the Mammy was viewed as being entirely asexual and so she was no threat. Eva is in many ways a Mammy figure. She creates an ever growing home in which she extends her care, time and space to all those who need it (and indeed sometimes to those who don't). She is a strong, legendary woman who is rumored to have taken her own leg to collect money on it, which is testimony to her strength and resilience. But Eva defies the convention in two major ways. Her sexuality is not viewed as threatening (or not as threatening as Sula's) to the town people but it is very real nevertheless, and this sexuality is a resistance to the convention. Additionally, in a more touching way, Eva defies the convention by devoting herself to her children. The Mammy is generally depicted as giving love to everyone but her own blood. On the surface, Eva appears to do the same, and Hannah (Eva's daughter) even

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

GET HELP

questions her about her apparent lack of love, saying, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (pg. 67). "No. I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'" (pg. 67), Eva replies. Her reply is short and seemingly cold and it immediately reads stylistically as if she is fitting the convention. In her consequent discussion with Hannah, however, Eva implies that she loved her children as hard and well as she could, but that her love may not appear to be conventional because their family life was never conventional. In this unconventional love, Eva rationalizes the killing of her drug-addict son and all of the other drastic and unexplained actions she has ever taken with herself and her family. Morrison crafts Eva in the convention of the Mammy in order to destroy the convention, signifying that no convention can contain an individual as unconventional as those she creates.

Giving voice, giving identity, and giving individuality to her characters is essential to the novel because in doing so, Morrison defies racialized silence and conventions. Through her language, Morrison creates a home for a people that is much more complex than the little tin triangles in Shadrack's tray would allow it to be. She creates a sense of home that is characterized by racial tensions and cultural confusions, but also ascension and realization, demonstrated sublimely in Nel's final wail of understanding (pg. 174). By drawing on racial conventions, Morrison can recreate them at will as a way to recognize their existence. But by characterizing them, she destroys them and redefines, giving back to her characters what stereotypes and crude depictions would otherwise deny them. In reflecting in a narrative voice the ways of seeing of several characters, from Sula, to Nel, to Shadrack, to the united social voice of the town's people, Morrison gives credence to their perceptions and ultimately reasserts their individuality. This constant reaffirmation of the importance of individuality and the ways in which it is created, destroyed, and applied in life is the ultimate refusal to accept the damaging racial ideologies and conventions Morrison represents and characterizes.

Need help with the assignment?

Our professionals are ready to assist with any writing!

[GET HELP](#)