

Depictions of the Self as a Common Theme
in Toni Morrison's Sula

Robert Milton Underwood, Jr.

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Sula, by Toni Morrison is a novel filled with rich and realistic characters. Many seem to have conflicts or issues with self as a common theme. The concept of self can be described and understood in this novel at the level of the individual, at the level of interpersonal relationships, and at the level of the community at large. The integration of these three levels gives us the best understanding of the common theme of self as portrayed by Toni Morrison.

Individual characters in Sula develop differently as a result of different upbringings and personal belief systems. Early in the novel, the character Shadrack comes home from the war after being injured in the face and head. He attacked a male nurse in the Veterans Hospital when the nurse tried to feed him. Preservation of the self becomes a dominant instinct when other senses, including mental acuity, become dull. Shadrack was put into confinement after the attack. While in jail, he noticed the reflection of his face in toilet water. His facial injury finally fully showed itself to him, and he was forced to see a truer picture of himself, a broader conception of his identity. His self concept included the possibility of suicide. After his release from jail, he created National Suicide Day, which almost no one in the town took seriously. But it was as if his self concept was so low that he felt like one of the walking dead. Suicide is a very selfish thing to do, depriving others through the loss, and depriving the self of life itself.

Eva, Sula's grandmother, killed her own son because he became addicted to drugs. Her reasoning was that his life wasn't worth living. Her own concept of self was so focused on what she wanted him to become that she would not allow him to become what he wanted. He died because he couldn't complete her vision of him.

Nell developed as a result of many things, including the way her mother responded to prejudice. Nel watched her mother accept verbal abuse on a train by the racist conductor. This

observation led her to contemplate her own selfhood (Beaulieu 336). She realized that she must be more in control of her life, and this incident helped to create a new sense of independence in her.

Morrison created the title character, Sula Mae Peace, to be adventurous, and to be a rebel (Kramer 41). Sula's early life developed in such a way as to lead her down a path of decided self interest. Sula was naturally strong willed, audacious, and was willing to accept tacit public disapproval for her actions in order to live her life the way she wanted to. She didn't care about being mean, because like being good, nothing positive came back to her as a result of the emotional risks taken.

The life of Sula was a philosophical parable about self creation (Weinstein 418). She wanted to expand barriers of attitude and behavior. She wanted full independence to invent herself as she wished. When told to get married and have babies, she rejected the notion to make someone else. She wanted full freedom to create only herself, and wanted to be this way at all costs.

Besides individual characteristics, the concept of self can also be understood through relationships in the story. Sula grew up in a home that was dominated by females, and these women considered loving men more important than self love (Roberson 162). They always liked the idea of men in terms of stereotypical strength and power, but men weren't actually around to help run the house. Thus, they wanted to love men and wanted men to love them. It was as if Eva has passed down "manlove" (Morrison 41) as a legacy. This must surely have had an effect on Sula's mother, Hannah, and on Sula herself. Her own concept of self was developing and at this stage of her life she wondered if loving a man would be fulfilling to her as she grew up. This was especially poignant since she didn't grow observing a healthy and committed husband and wife

relationship in the household.

Eva hadn't been willing or able to express the kind of nurturing love that her daughter Hannah needed. Subsequently, Hannah emotionally starved her own daughter. Sula's relationship with her mother affected the way she matured. She once watched her mother burn to death from her grandmother's back porch. It was as if she was immune from emotional involvement, and she obviously was not interested in her mother, rather only her own self as a spectator.

The relationship of Sula and Nell was integral to the story. They became best friends in childhood. One grave incident affected them powerfully, yet differently. Both Nell and Sula realized they were responsible for the drowning death of a neighborhood boy, Chicken Little, after Sula accidentally let go of him while swinging him. Neither rushed to try to save him from drowning. Afterwards, at the funeral, Sula cried uncontrollably. It might have been the last time she showed so much compassion for humanity. In contrast, Nell was emotionless. This indifference on the part of Nell showed a lack of compassion and a lack of awareness beyond her self awareness. Perhaps in an attempt to control her feelings, Sula learns from Nell in this case how to either block the expression of feelings or to be without feelings. This incident greatly affected both girls as they matured into women. Nell actually grew up thinking that the incident had little to do with what she had become (Beaulieu 337).

As Sula and Nell were passing beyond puberty, they enjoyed being noticed by the men in the town. Being noticed as sexual beings was empowering for them, especially for Sula. Sula was an experimenter by nature, and eventually took that sexual power to extremes. It became one of her ways to satisfy her inner self. As she later matured in self creation, making love became one of her arenas for self expression.

Sula was hurt by Nell's decision to marry. She almost felt betrayed by her friend. Again, Sula was thinking of what she would lose rather than what her friend would gain. Nell watched Sula leave the church after the wedding with just a hint of a strut in her walk. That little strut symbolized Sula's walking confidently down the road on to the next chapter of her life. Her self confidence wouldn't allow disappointment to stop her from creating in the self-centered way she preferred.

Sula was away from town for 10 years. Reasons for her return are not clear, but perhaps she came back to a town in which she could feel safe. Sula seemingly did what she could with antisocial behavior to avoid developing nurturing friendships¹. When she came back, she did things that seem to have been for the sole purpose of shocking everyone. For example, she put her grandmother in a nursing home for poor white women. She also began sleeping indiscriminately with other men, including Nell's husband. The single act that could break up a good friendship was sleeping with the spouse of a good friend. However Sula's self concept had hardened, and her version of reality had so twisted to the will of her self interest that she felt the acts were justified. She even wondered why Nell couldn't understand her and accept that she needed to do it.

Later in life, Nell realized that she had really missed Sula. She also realized that their youthful friendship had been the most important relationship in her life. Good friends, like good marriage partners, bring out something from each that the other doesn't have². Sula and Nell were almost like two halves of the same person. Each one lacked something the other didn't have (Century 49). Nell's ultimate realization of the importance of her relationship with Sula hints at

¹ It is interesting to note that Toni Morrison was so busy during the time of her life when she wrote Sula that she had little time for developing friendships (Kramer 42). She often would not show up for a dinner to which she had been invited. Anyone wanting to be her friend at that time in her life had to accept her the way she was.

² Toni Morrison said that she was interested in portraying Sula and Nell as two halves of the same person. Each one lacked something the other had. (Century 49).

the possibility of change, and she gets a glimpse of what it may be like to see herself as a whole being on its own.

Sula's relationship with Ajax was more rewarding than the sex it involved. Sula was accepted by Ajax, at least for a time. Ajax was willing to listen to her. She thrived on this attention that went beyond sexuality. He listened to her and was not threatened by her intelligence (Beaulieu 338). This was a relationship that was satisfying to her needs. The more he listened to her and showed her consideration, the more she began to feel possessive of him. But Ajax doesn't want to be possessed by her, because that wouldn't be consistent with his own sense of self. He breaks off the relationship with her as a result. Sula had been looking for love, and Ajax has just been looking (Roberson 3).

The third way that self can be understood as a common theme in the book is to look at the community aspect. The townspeople of Medallion seemed to welcome Sula's rebelliousness and her flagrant violations of the social codes of their community (Century 48). Perhaps this implicit allowance of Sula's ways permitted her to proceed farther in the direction of her inclinations. The African-American people that Toni Morrison usually wrote about in her stories thought that evil had a natural place in the universe (Kramer 42). They saw her as evil, but they allowed her to live there peacefully. The townspeople recognized this evil in Sula, and comparing themselves to her, realized that they must cherish and protect their family members more than they had done in the past. They created their own communal sense of self, a collective consciousness of unity as a result. This collective consciousness manifested itself in enhanced individual and filial consideration.

Ironically, after Sula's death, the town began to slowly return to their own evil ways. Sula had provided a much-needed sharp contrast for them, making it easier for them to see the error in

too much focus on self-centered ways, such as those of Sula. Goodness seems to have been contaminated by evil's presence (Beaulieu 339). When evil is gone, the contrast between black and white provides a less clear dividing line for wholesome living.

The self concepts of individuals affect how they react to and with the world around them. Interpersonal relationships were affected in Sula. The entire community was affected as its collective sense of self evolved. It was a novel about self discovery and also self creation. It is through an integration of characters, relationships and community that we get a full understanding of the common theme of self throughout the novel.

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