



The Analysis of Sula's Image as a New World Black Woman ---- Preserver and Destroyer

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Abstract

Sula, the heroine in the second novel by Toni Morrison, has attracted the attention of many critics and readers. There are many discussions and reviews on Sula, especially on Sula's image from every perspective. Based on the previous reviews, this paper mainly analyzes Sula's image as a new world black woman ---- a preserver and destroyer from a feminist perspective, which is of great help for readers to have a better understanding of Sula.

Key words: Sula; Image; Preserver; Destroyer

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Sula, Toni Morrison's second novel, since its publication in 1973, has triggered a "kind of critical stampede".² It portrays an eccentric, unmanageable, and unusual new black woman. The novel, especially the character Sula and the author, appeal to an increasing number of reviewers, literary critics, and general readers. Many scholars have analyzed it from every kind of critical perspective. It has

been labeled as a "black woman's epic," a study of "female friendship," an "antiwar novel," a "contemporary fable," an exploration of the "feminine psyche," and "a prime postmodernist text".

Sula is centered on a matriarchal line of three generations of women, and the relationship between the two main female characters, Sula and Nel, from their childhood to their divergent choices as adults. It defies racial stereotypes and follows the exciting, wild and dangerous character of Sula who, in her search for experience and total freedom, becomes the embodiment of both potential of black womanhood and also its antithesis, the target of every hatred, the outrageous scapegoat of her community.

Toni Morrison wrote in *Unspeakable thing Unspoken*: I always thought of Sula as quintessentially 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.³

As stated by Morrison herself, Sula has such a complicated character that it is difficult to define her. Some critics particularly praised Morrison's vivid imagery, strong characterization, and poetic prose, as well as her terse, realistic dialogue. *Sula*'s multiplicity of meaning is summarized by Maureen T. Reddy: "*Sula* can be, and has been, read as, among other things, a fable, a lesbian novel, a black female *bildungsroman*, a novel of heroic questing, and a historical novel that captures a crucial change in black patterns of living. . .".⁴ The novel

²Brooks, Bouson J. (2000). *Quiet as It's kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race In The Novels of Toni Morrison* (p.23). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

³Morrison, Toni (1989). *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature*. *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 28, 1-34.

⁴Reddy, Maureen T. (2000). The Triples Plot and Center of *Sula*. In Solomon O. Iyasers and Marla W. Iyasere (Eds.), *Understanding Toni Morrison's Beloved and Sula* (pp.1-18). New York: Whitson Publishing Company.

focuses on a young black girl named Sula, an “unusual child” who matures into a strong and determined woman in the face of adversity and distrust, even hatred by the black community in which she lives.

As a female black writer, Morrison is greatly concerned about the fate and the future of black woman. Therefore her stories are rooted in the history and reality of black people who have been relegated as “other” and socially marginalized. However, Morrison resists the pressure to portray only positive or idealistic characters. She consistently interrogates and deconstructs the long-held stereotypical images of black womanhood as the mammy, the tragic mulatto, the Jezebel, the maids, etc. Instead her description of black women is realistic and varied, ranging from the heroic to the pathetic; from the average to the pariah. As Barbara Christian states:

“Toni Morrison’s works are fantastic earthy realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Primal in their essence, her characters come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but as basic as the earth they stand on. They erupt out of the world, sometimes gently, often with force and terror”.⁵

As a black woman author, Morrison is a double outsider in the patriarchal, white culture — a position which allows her to criticize both the white and the black worlds. She claims she is writing for the black people. Her novels are mainly about a section of society that many have not, and perhaps never will have had contact with. Morrison illustrates the important ways in which families and communities can shape a child’s identity. *Sula* not only portrays the way children are shaped, but also the way a community receives an adult who challenges the very environment that moulds them. It also portrays the changing role of women in the twentieth century, and the struggle between the old ideals versus the newfound independence of women.

Sula represents the new world woman who challenges social norms and determines to live an experimental life. Embodying freedom, adventure, curiosity, unpredictability, passion, and danger, Sula takes little from others and gives even less. She is not ruthless; rather, she is spontaneous and unable to moderate or temper the sudden impact her actions might have on her community. She often seems perpetually stuck in a kind of childlike impetuosity. Morrison states that Sula “had no center, no speck around which to grow” (p.119);⁶ her life is like an open rainbow for experimental freedom that often touches the edges of danger.

Many scholars have made in-depth studies of

the multifaceted themes and style of the novel, the characterization of Sula, the narrative techniques, and the significance of black culture such as folklore and myth. In many reviews Sula is described as an independent, rebellious, eccentric woman, but as a preserver and destroyer has not been mentioned. In this essay the author will exemplify Sula as a preserver and destroyer from a black feminist perspective.

Sula, as an outcast, helps define and strengthen the community even as she defines herself by her lack of conformity. She is willing to go far beyond the accepted norms to establish “herself”. In her pursuit of identity, she closes her eyes to the effects her actions have on others. She becomes the evil that bonds the community together and the force that tears families apart. It seems that she stands in opposition to the community that is firmly rooted in ritual and tradition. As the novel progresses, the readers reach the conclusion that Sula is a preserver and a destroyer at the same time.

As Badt states, Sula is “the errant, erotic force who breaks up marriage and destroyed friendships”.⁷ However, some critics believe that Sula, as a pariah, is, in a sense, a force which keeps the community cohesive. The community views Sula as a pariah whose eccentricity cleanses and purifies the guilt of the community. As a pariah, she is very useful for the conscience of that community, and makes the community complete and whole. Unlike her mother who always tried to give something in return, Sula uses and then disregards men. To protect themselves from Sula’s “evil”, the people of the town “laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps” and engaged in “one or two unsuccessful attempts to collect the dust from her footsteps”(p.113). Other than these actions, the people of the Bottom left Sula to her own devices.

Belief in Sula’s evil doings resulted in profound changes in the community. Morrison states:

“Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst”. (p.117)

In this way, Sula helped define and strengthen the community. She serves an important function in the community as a scapegoat. She takes on for them the evil they have previously done to each other. They become righteous simply by defining themselves as being different from her. Sula is separate and apart from the community, yet the community is dependent on her as the force that

⁵Barbara Christian (1933). *The Contemporary Fables*. In Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K.A.Appiah (ed.), *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (pp.62-79), New York: Amistad Press. .

⁶All quotations from Morrison, Toni, *Sula*, (New York: Plume, 1973), will now and hereafter be acknowledged by page number.

⁷Badt, Luisa Karen (1995). *The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A Master of ‘Ancient’ Property’*. *African American Review*, 29, 567-77.

binds them collectively together. In other words, her defiance unifies the community by objectifying its danger. Therefore, Sula's presence has a beneficial effect on the community and reinforces the collective social and racial identity of the Bottom. In this sense, Sula functions as a preserving force that keeps the community being good to each other. Thus after her death, the community seemed to lose their unity, as Morrison states:

"Other mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. ... Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity...." (p.153-54)

According to Morrison, Sula is "a classic type of evil force," but adds, "... one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks good—you never really know what it is"⁸

Sula's "evil" nature is used by her community to validate and enrich its own existence. As a pariah, she gives them a focus through which they achieve some unity, at least temporarily. Morrison uses the folklore tradition to show how the black race accepts evil unlike the white race. "It never occurs to the people of Medallion to kill Sula. Black people never annihilate evil. They don't run it out of their neighborhoods, chop it up or burn it up. They don't have witch hangings. They try to protect themselves from evil, of course, but they do not have that puritanical thing which says if you see a witch, then burn it."⁹

The folk culture of the community is geared toward survival rather than change and this is apparent in the community's perception of evil as an uncontrollable natural phenomenon that must be allowed to run its course. Morrison clarifies their position on evil:

"In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, to fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate or prevent its happening again. So also were they with people.

... The purpose of evil was to survive it and the determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason that they didn't commit suicide—it was beneath them." (pp.89-90).

Their philosophy of survival exhibits a cynicism about the limits of living, which is grounded in history of

struggle continually to survive. Their attitude towards evil reflects their experience under various oppressions.

Even though the black community of the Bottom, as Morrison continually emphasizes, does recognize the fact that evil is an inevitable part of life, they are too quick to label anyone who deviates from their accepted conventions as being evil. So when Sula has frequent sex, and throws her grandmother out of the house, and even threatening to set her aflame, this evil soul half is interesting because its pureness seems to frighten people into denying the evil in themselves. Bad mothers take a sudden loving interest in their children. Wives coddle their husbands. Those who never cared for old people take an immediate interest in their welfare. It is as if Sula's evil is enough to compensate for everyone's evil in the community of Medallion. It is a force that pushes people into the good side of the spectrum.

Sula's "bad womanhood" is interesting, because it is not just a complement to Nel's goodness. It also gives the other folk of Medallion a means to define themselves, even if it was only temporary. Perhaps having people like Sula in a community could be considered a necessary evil if it motivates people to do good. In response to Sula's scorn for motherhood, the women of the community, who previously neglected their children, are forced to defend motherhood by paying closer attention to their children. Another example where Sula is used as a measure by women to define themselves is provided by Nel:

"It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh, who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself... Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves. Other people seemed to turn their volume on and up when Sula was in the room". (p.95)

Years after Sula's death, Nel comes to this realization at her friend's grave: Nel is finally able to identify the source of the grief that has undermined her after her husband's departure; the loss she suffered was actually not him but Sula. The real reason for her sadness, then, is Sula's absence:

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.' It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow". (p.174)

Sula's death is seen as a good omen. The people of the town go to her burial not out of respect or duty,

⁸Robert Stepto (1994). *Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison*. Danille Taylor-Githrie (Ed.), *Conversations With Toni Morrison* (p.13). Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

⁹Nancy Chodorow (1978). *Reproduction of Mothering and Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (p.100). CA: University of California Press.

but to confirm that the “witch” has indeed been buried. Immediately following her death, rumors of black workers being hired for the construction of the tunnel and the building of a new old folks home for the white and black alike begin to circulate. To the community, these events signal that the town has been freed from Sula’s evil spell. Soon afterwards, an early frost grips the town and ruins the crops and black people in the Bottom “suffered heavily in their thin houses and thinner clothes”(p.152), thus leading people to believe that even from the grave, Sula has the power to control and destroy their lives.

Nigro points out that after Sula dies, “the community’s role of defining itself through acceptance and disapproval of one of its members shifts. No longer is the she-devil the focus of their collective energies”.¹⁰ Shortly after her death the tragedy at the tunnel occurs. Many of those who hate Sula reveal their despairing self-hatred when they join in Shadcrak’s National Suicide Day. It is the middle of the most difficult winter in memory, and they do not know what to do. They attempt to strike back at the nameless, and faceless exploitation that is responsible for their current predicament by killing “the tunnel they were forbidden to build”(p.161), but this futile action causes their own destruction when the tunnel collapses and many die.

In conclusion, Sula, the image of a preserver and destroyer, is clearly revealed in front of the reader. Sula can be named as a new world black woman as she dares to defy society’s restrictive traditions and contests the concept of female sexuality and motherhood in search of self. She is a pioneer seeking her true self by revolting against double discrimination and oppression. She openly rebels against all that is white and male, and the invisible cruel system that oppresses and distorts black women’s individuality. Sula had rejected the traditional feminine role and sought to define herself in a way that differs from all she has known. She rebels against what patriarchal society has deemed her role: that of having babies and taking care of a husband, by living an experimental life. Morrison’s craft of allowing Sula to be both good and evil allows her character to emerge as the defining new world black woman: a preserver and destroyer at the same time. The black community needs her as much as, or perhaps more than, she needs it.

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¹⁰Marie Nigro. (1998). In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison’s Sula, *Journal of Black Studies*, 28, 731.

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