

Toni Morrison's *Sula*: Formation of the Self in Terms of Love-Death Relationships with Others and with Oneself

ADRIANA JIMÉNEZ RODRÍGUEZ

Abstract

This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* from the joint perspectives of feminism and African-American women's writing. It attempts to explore, using a New Critic approach, the undeniable presence of the forces of love and death throughout the narrative in the specific context of the protagonist's relationship with others and with herself.

Key words: *Sula*, feminism, African-American literature, Toni Morrison, love, death

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza la novela de Toni Morrison *Sula* desde el punto de vista feminista de la escritura de las autoras Afro-Americanas. El objetivo es explorar, mediante un enfoque de la escuela crítica del "New Criticism", la presencia indudable de las fuerzas del amor y de la muerte a lo largo de la narración, específicamente a través de las relaciones interpersonales e intrapersonales de la protagonista.

Palabras claves: *Sula*, feminismo, literatura Afro-Norteamericana, Toni Morrison, amor, muerte

S*ula*, Toni Morrison's second novel, was published in 1973. A strong, vibrating novel which, as McKay claims, Morrison considers "a novel about black women's friendships, and about good and evil" (McKay 4), it came to destroy previous stereotypes of black female characters in the North American literary tradition. Eva and Sula Peace are wholly different from the stereotypical female characters we are used to. In fact, as Bryant notes, "[m]ost of us have been conditioned to expect something else in black characters, especially black female characters [...] We do not expect to see a fierceness bordering on the demonic" (qtd. in McKay 5). Perhaps this explains the uncertain and ambiguous critical reception of the book. In terms of black literature, authors

were expected to create black characters who embodied only “good” human traits, and, according to Deborah McDowell, the trend continues to this day: “... Afro-American critics of Afro-American literature, in both the popular media and academic journals, continue to resist any work that does not satisfy the nebulous demand for the ‘positive’ racial SELF” (78). Needless to say, *Sula* is a character that is not easily categorized as either good or evil; she is a complex female character that creates resistance in rather than cooperation from the reader. It is not that Toni Morrison is not interested in racial issues; on the contrary, she goes beyond simplistic racial labels and is committed enough to explore the depths of human nature, the human conflicts that black people share with all other “races”, without failing to perceive that being black *and* female does complicate the situation. “Writing out of both the black and the black women’s traditions,” explains McKay, “her novels are a rejection of white patriarchal modernism, and are radical revisions of the race and male-centered Afro-American literary tradition” (2). From the point of view of form the text also resists tradition, which is only appropriate given the transgressive subject matter—that is, just as *Sula* escapes any unifying categorization, “the novel’s fragmentary, episodic, elliptical quality *helps to thwart textual unity, to prevent a totalized interpretation*. [...] Whatever coherence and meaning resides in the narrative, the reader must struggle to create [my italics]” (McDowell 86). This being said, it is necessary to clarify the scope of the present study, for the novel opens up multiple levels of possible—and fascinating—analysis. This essay proposes to analyze *Sula* in terms of its two controlling forces: love and death. In general terms, it adheres to the methods of New Criticism. The theoretical backdrop, in terms of the ideas that are assumed to be present in the development of the essay, whether explicit or implicit, is an all-encompassing feminism, containing important elements of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. Although the forces of love and death are pervasively present in *Sula*, the present study will focus on how these forces converge (or dissolve) in the character of *Sula*. Within this specific context, the text can be thematically structured in the following units: the conflict between *Sula* and the town, the complex relationship between *Sula* and Nel, and finally, the way in which *Sula* constructs her identity in terms of her relationships with others and her intimacy with herself.

Even a casual reading of *Sula* will show that the community of the Bottom is more than just a setting for the novel: it is fairly apparent that the town is a character in its own right. One possible interpretation argues that “the community of the Bottom [...] is not only a place but a presence—a kind of collective conscience that arbitrates the social and moral norms of its members” (Rubenstein 148). A slightly more sophisticated interpretation is McDowell’s argument in her article “‘The Self and the Other’: Reading Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and the Black Female Text,” where she claims that the novel “glories in paradox and ambiguity beginning with the prologue that describes the setting, the Bottom, situated spatially in the top. We enter a new world here, a world where we never get to the ‘bottom’ of things, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions” (80).

The community's relationship with Sula is apparently based on a love-hate-love situation—"hate" is understood here (and in the rest of the essay as well) as one form of death. But why did they hate her? In the text, the fact that Sula is perfectly aware of this does not help to elucidate the cause: "She was pariah, then, and knew it. Knew that they despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men" (Morrison 122). Rubenstein claims that the town hates Sula because "she catalyzes the anxieties of those whose paths she crosses because (in others' eyes) she lives out the amoral potentialities that most people repress" (132). This is certainly a very likely possibility, and if so, is it not true that such hate carries a large amount of yearning? And is yearning not a form of love in its most primal state? Sula herself believes that if the community does not love her now, it will when the time comes, or at least manifest it in a more traditional way: "[She] raised herself up on her elbows. Her face glistened with the dew of fever. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then fell back on the pillows and sighed. 'Oh, they'll love me all right. It will take time, but they'll love me.'" (Morrison 145) Rubenstein also believes that the character of the town serves the purpose of marking social and psychological boundaries, in this case, boundaries between Sula as a black female pariah in the process of identity construction, and the segregated black community:

The representation of boundary is amplified on the collective level in Morrison's characterization of the terms within and against which a black community defines itself. In each of her narratives, a community functions as a moral arbiter, the source of both individual and group norms. Her characters are defined in part through their acceptance of or challenge to certain collective presumptions. Conversely, as a kind of collective conscience, the community either includes or excludes its members on the basis of their accordance with its implicit—though frequently contradictory—values. Thus, separation and division are not only psychological processes but often also social ones, as the figure of the pariah is set apart from the community. (146)

Other than the reason that the town hates her, the next question to resolve is why Sula is set apart; and the answer seems to lie in Morrison's feminist beliefs and in her rejection of patriarchal values. In effect, Sula is an independent female with an inexhaustible imagination, and "the narrative suggests that one cannot belong to the community and preserve the imagination, for the orthodox vocations for women—marriage and motherhood—restrict if not preclude imaginative expression" (McDowell 84). Furthermore, there is one more possible explanation. If love is understood as the basic principle of life, then the town (and Nel, for she is thoroughly assimilated into the community) is dead and Sula is alive; this juxtaposition between life and death would explain both the hatred and the yearning, as well as the final death of the town along with Sula's. This makes particular sense when the following passage is considered: "But the free fall, oh no, that required—invention: a thing to do with the wings ... a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues and stay

alive. But alive was what they, and now Nel, did not want to be. Too dangerous” (Morrison 120). When Sula dies, it then becomes only a matter of time before the collective death of most of the townspeople; the reader is told that “... there was something wrong. A falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the relief that Sula’s death brought a restless irritability took hold” (Morrison 153). This “restless irritability” holds the seed of death. It can therefore be claimed that Sula and the Bottom’s relationship is in fact, a love-death relationship, shifting back and forth between these two emotions and ending, finally, in the literal and metaphorical fulfillment of Shadrack’s infamous National Suicide Day, which occurs only after Sula dies.

Beyond a doubt, the relationship between Sula and Nel is central to the theme of Morrison’s novel, especially when considered from the love-death / death-love perspective. In order to look into this very special relationship, one might begin by considering McDowell’s deconstructive approach in terms of the binary opposition that Nel and Sula may at first glance appear to represent, for she believes that “*Sula* [...] is rife with liberating possibilities in that it transgresses all deterministic structures of opposition” (79). Specifically, this critic insightfully claims that “the novel invokes oppositions of good/evil, virgin/whore, self/other, but moves beyond them, avoiding the false choices they imply and dictate” (80). During the course of the narrative, the reader is presented with several descriptions of the Sula-Nel friendship. We are led to believe either that they complement each other, that they are two parts of a single identity unit, or that they are the same person. It seems unnecessary to choose only one of these categorizations; on the contrary, one must attempt to move beyond them (or around them) and come up with an alternative—even if inclusive—description that suits the peculiar nature of their friendship. One would then come to agree with McDowell’s proposal: “The relationship of other to self in this passage, and throughout the narrative, must be seen as *‘different but connected rather than separate and opposed,’* to borrow from Carole Gilligan [my italics]” (82). In his essay “The Thematics of Memory and ‘Missing’ Subjects in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”, Robert Grant gets to the heart of the girls’ relationship when he claims that “so intimate is their [Sula and Nel’s] sorority that, in one of the novel’s most mystical sequences, they silently perform a subconsciously ritualized ‘play’ expressing, through the ‘innocent’ displacement of ‘fooling around outside,’ an intensely shared awareness of the secrets of *eros* and *thanatos*” (99). If one considers the passage to which he is making reference, it becomes impossible to disagree:

When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass... But soon she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole the size of a cup. [...] Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. [...] Carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. Neither one had spoken a word. (Morrison 58-59)

Sula and Nel were committed to life and to love, they were curious and imaginative and creative, and these qualities allowed them to embrace all things alive: "... toughness was not their quality—adventuresomeness was—and a mean determination to explore everything that interested them [...] Joined in mutual admiration they watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement" (Morrison 55). But there comes a break in their life-loving status when Nel surrenders to her predetermined social role and gets married. "Like so many woman writers," says McDowell, "Morrison equates marriage with the death of the female self and imagination" (82); and it is precisely this which makes the break doubly painful. After a ten-year gap in Sula's life story, she returns to the Bottom, ironically heralded by hundreds of dead robins, and, after a friendly rendezvous with her old companion, proceeds to sleep with her husband causing the end of their marriage. The key to deciphering these events connects to the first instance of the death of the Sula-Nel relationship, in other words, when Nel marries Jude. Contrary to Sula, who is sexually liberated, "Nel's sexuality is not expressed in itself and for her own pleasure, but rather, for the pleasure of her husband and in obedience to a system of ethical judgment and moral virtue [...] Because Nel's sexuality is harnessed to and only enacted with the institutions that sanction sexuality for women—marriage and family—she does not own it" (McDowell 82). After Nel finds them in the act and Jude leaves her for good—like all the men in the novel inevitably do—she dies in the only life and sexuality that she had been allowed to experience so far: "For now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (Morrison 110-111). According to McDowell, the brilliance of the text's construction is that it does not require the reader to choose between condemning Sula and pitying Nel, or blaming Nel for her narrowness of life, since "the narrative is neither an apology for Sula's destruction nor an unsympathetic critique of Nel's smug conformity. It does not reduce a complex set of dynamics to a simple opposition or choice between two 'pure' alternatives" (86). Nevertheless, and in all fairness, the text does seem a little more sympathetic towards Sula, and points an accusing finger at the fact that she was apparently sorely misunderstood. As critic Robert Grant puts it, "... Morrison seems to be claiming for Sula a definition of 'goodness' which connects more to an existential 'inner' faith and integrity than with sociometric 'good works' or charity. Morrison suggests that Sula's antinomianism demands for itself the title of personal 'virtue' that is validated by the misperception and incomprehension of Nel and the Bottom community" (101). Sadly, Sula and Nel never recover what they had, but, undoubtedly, their remarkable relationship remains one of the most impressive accomplishments in the novel. It may be useful to finish this section by borrowing Luce Irigaray's words as quoted in McDowell's article: "Day and night are mingled in our gazes [...] If we divide light from night, we give up the lightness of our mixture [...] We out ourselves into watertight compartments, break ourselves up into parts, cut ourselves in two [...] we are always one and the other, at the same time" (80).

Let's turn our attention to the character of Sula, beginning with her childhood and adolescence and the tremendous influence that her mother and grandmother had in her development as a grown woman. Eva and Hannah are strong women, similar in their independence and self-reliability, and different mainly in the way that they perceived motherhood (even if probably sharing the forces that motivated them). Eva Peace is "[o]ne of the most perplexing characters of recent American fiction," states Hortense Spillers, who "embodies a figure of both insatiable generosity and insatiable demanding. Like Hannah, Eva is seldom frustrated by the trammels of self-criticism, the terrible indecisiveness and scrupulosity released by doubt" (227). Eva, the matriarch, was the one to set the example in terms of relationships with men: "Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she didn't participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter" (Morrison 41). As for her daughter Hannah, there is no doubt regarding her powerful sexual magnetism, which is certainly attached to an all-encompassing love of life: "Her voice trailed, dipped and bowed; she gave a chord to the simplest words. Nobody, but nobody, could say 'hey sugar' like Hannah. [...] What she wanted ... and what she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching every day" (Morrison 43-44). These two women are both independent and sexually appealing to men, and the fact that they sustained fairly liberal heterosexual liaisons is particularly relevant to Sula's future sexual behavior; indeed, as McDowell states, "Sula's female heritage is an unbroken line of 'man-loving' women who exist as *sexually desirable subjects rather than as objects of male desire* [my italics]" (82). But Eva and Hannah also bequeathed the shadow of their souls to Sula. On this matter, Spillers's analysis is particularly accurate:

Just as Hannah and Eva have been Sula's principal models, they have also determined certain issues which she will live out in her own career. It is probably not accidental that the question which haunts Hannah—have I been loved? —devolves on Sula with redoubtable fury. If it is true that love does not exist until it is named, then the answer to the enigma of Sula Peace is not any more forthcoming than if it were not so. Yet, certainly the enormous consequences of being loved or not are relevant by implication to the agents of the novel. Morrison does not elaborate, but the instances of the question's appearance [...] conceal the single most important element in the women's encounter with each other. A revealing conversation between Eva and Hannah suggests that even for the adult female the intricacies and entanglements of mother love (or perhaps woman love without distinction) is a dangerous inquiry to engage. (229)

By examining Sula's immediate female role-models, it is not hard to perceive, then, that the question of love / death was certainly an important part of her identity formation from girlhood onwards.

But there is much more to Sula than her relationships. Notwithstanding the relevance of her relationships with others, what is most striking about this

woman is her relationship with herself; and it is also fascinating to consider the dimension of love-hate or hate-love in the arena of Sula's self-exploration and self-construction processes, especially since "Sula resists our search for the conventional 'unified' sensibility or personality" (Grant 92). Spillers studies the reaction of the reader when faced by such a worthy yet challenging character: "Sula is both loved and hated by the reader, embraced and rejected simultaneously because her audience is forced to accept the corruption of absolutes and what has been left in their place—the complex, alienated, transitory gestures of a personality who has no framework of a moral reference *beyond or other than herself* [my italics]" (212). In terms of the text, this last statement is the most evident in Sula's verbal encounter with Eva when she returns to the Bottom after her ten-year absence:

"... Any more fires in this house, I'm lighting them!"
 "Hellfire don't need lighting and it's already burning in you..."
 "Whatever's burning in me is mine!"
 "And I'll split this town in two and everything in it before I let you put it out!"
 "Pride goeth before a fall."
 "What the hell do I care about falling?" (93)

Here we can see exactly how hard it is to categorize Sula as good or evil, as in favor of love or death. That she loves herself is fairly evident, but then again so is her carelessness about "falling" (read also "dying" in all its possible forms) which just as easily can be qualified as a desire for self-destruction. The text does give an explanation for such a feeling, though: "Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift of metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous" (Morrison 121). But fundamentally speaking, the place where we most see Sula as she really is, at the heart and soul of her conflict and in that very private place of her being where love and death collide and converge, is during—and after—sex. In the physical act of sex, Sula finds the ultimate experience of the spirit—and what is most fascinating, this experience, in accordance to Lacanian psychoanalysis, is far from an act of sharing with a partner. It is through sex that Sula finds death "in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning" and yet, where she finds the ultimate love is also in the "postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (Morrison 123). What a marvelous communion with oneself! And what a remarkable capacity for self-knowledge and self-understanding! McDowell agrees with this analysis when she states that, "in other words, Sula's sexuality is neither located in the realm of 'moral' abstractions nor expressed within the institution of marriage that legitimates it for women. Rather it is in *the realm of sensory experience and in the service of*

self-exploration that leads to self-intimacy [my italics]" (83). In her article "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love," Spillers expresses the reader's reaction to Sula in terms of love and hate when she claims that "we would like to love Sula, or damn her, inasmuch as the myth of the black American woman allows only Manichean responses, but it is impossible to do either. We can only behold in an absolute suspension of final judgment" (230). Maybe the key is in the fact that Sula is the only judge of Sula—such is her desperate and loving surrender to herself.

Whether we are dealing with the realm of inter-relationships or intra-relationships, it seems that Toni Morrison's *Sula* addresses the themes of love and death at and from multiple levels of understanding with an incredible depth of sentiment and stylistic flair. It is only fitting to conclude the present essay with at least a glimpse into the ending of the novel. We witness Nel finally deciding to confront herself, her love, her death, her loss; we listen with all our senses as "leaves stirred; mud lifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. [...] It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (Morrison 174). Once the first impression—of absolute awe at Morrison's talent in constructing such an amazingly cohesive text that ends up neatly rounded upon itself—passes, it is inevitable for one not to agree with McDowell's opinion in that "the 'circles and circles' of sorrow she [Nel] cried at the narrative's end prepare her for what Sula strained to experience throughout her life: *the process of mourning and remembering that leads to intimacy with the self*, which is all that makes intimacy with others possible [my italics]" (85). It is also possible that those circles might end up enveloping the reader and inducing her/him to begin such a journey her/himself, and this is certainly a provocative (even if dangerous) invitation. Incidentally, Spillers' final remarks are also worth considering:

If we identify Sula as a kind of countermythology, we are saying that she is no longer bound by a rigid pattern of predictions, predilections, and anticipations. Even though she is a character in a novel, her strategic place as a *potential being* might argue that *subversion* itself—law breaking—is an aspect of liberation that women must confront from its various angles, in its different guises. Sula's outlawry may not be the best kind, but that she has the will towards rebellion itself is the stunning idea. This project in liberation, paradoxically, has no particular dimension in time, yet it is for all time. (233)

Toni Morrison's *Sula* deals with the various presences of love and death specifically in relation to Sula and how her relationships with others and with herself influenced her identity formation process, and hopefully not unsuccessfully. "After all," says McDowell, "as Sula playfully suggests, our conception of who we are never include all that we are anyway. One answer, then, to the epigraph: 'What shall we call our *self*?' is we shall call ourselves by many names. Our metaphors

of self cannot then rest in stasis, but will glory in difference and overflow into everything that belongs to us" (88). And perhaps it is even possible to extrapolate this statement in terms of what would then be called our "metaphors of love and death," because, as this analysis of *Sula* has tried to emphasize, dualities such as love and death do not move in straight lines. Rather, they float under and above, they dissolve and intersect and reconstitute, and they build and destroy each other in ways that are much more complicated than any one-dimensional and straightforward chronology.

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