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The Triple Plot and Center of *Sula*

Maureen T. Reddy

With the same disregard for name changes by marriage that the black people of Medallion always showed, each flat slab had one word carved on it. Together they read like a chant: PEACE 1895-1921, PEACE 1890-1923, PEACE 1910-1940, PEACE 1892-1959.

They were not dead people. They were words. Not even words. Wishes, longings. (171)

Toni Morrison's *Sula* begins and ends with death: The "prologue" to the novel tells of the death of both a neighborhood and its characteristic way of life, and the "epilogue," from which the above is quoted, is set in a cemetery where Nel Wright Greene is finally beginning to mourn the death of her friend Sula Peace, twenty-five years after the fact. These deaths, as Nel's thoughts about the grave markers suggest, are linked to wider scenes of death, to war and to the longing for peace, and, significantly, to freedom through the formal structure of the novel. The untitled prologue describes the settling of the Bottom by a freed slave, thereby calling up associations with the Civil War, and of its destruction a century later in order to make way for a golf course, calling to mind the aftermath of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, which often seemed more like a war on the poor, with its massive urban renewal (removal) projects that displaced many black people. The epilogue is titled "1965," reminding us of both the war in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. The novel's other chapters are also titled with years, with the first, "1919," recalling World War I and the last, "1941," World War II. Each of the ten major chapters includes a death, sometimes metaphoric but more usually actual: "1919" describes the death of a nameless and quite literally faceless soldier in war and Shadrack's founding of National Suicide Day. "1920" includes

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the death of Cecile Sabat; "1921," the burning of Plum Peace; "1922," the drowning of Chicken Little; and "1923," the burning of Hannah Peace. The next three chapters focus on metaphoric deaths: "1927," the death of Nel's inner self through her marriage to Jude Greene, who thinks that he and Nel "together would make one Jude" (83); "1937," the death of Nel's and Sula's friendship; and "1939," Sula's fantasized destruction of Ajax. In "1940" we have Sula's death and in "1941" the last National Suicide Day, which culminates in the deaths of many townspeople, all of them black. In examining here the ways in which Morrison's narrative technique continually pushes the reader to refer outward from the ostensible subject of *Sula*, I want to argue for a broader reading of the novel than is usually offered.

Critics of *Sula* frequently comment on the pervasive presence of death, the uses of a particular cultural and historical background, the split or doubled protagonist (Sula/Nel), and the attention to chronology in the novel. However, as far as I am aware, no one has presented a reading of *Sula* that explores the interrelatedness of these elements; yet it is the connections among them that most usefully reveal the novel's overall thematic patterns. *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 an historical novel that captures a crucial change in black patterns of living;¹ all these modes are certainly discernable in the text. One approach that has not been taken is to read *Sula* as a war novel or, more precisely, as an anti-war novel.

The phrasing of Nel's musings at the cemetery demands that we work out the distinctions she makes among words, wishes, and longings. Her commentary on the grave markers moves from the concrete to the abstract, a movement that accentuates the way in which the "chant" Nel reads is an assertion of hope, not a description of reality, for in fact there has been no peace from 1895-1921 or 1890-1923 or 1910-1940 or 1892-1959—not in the world, not in the black community, not in the individual lives of the people now decaying in those graves—unless we think of Peace strictly as a surname designating the now-dead people, a possibility Nel immediately negates. The word is more concrete than the wish it gestures toward, the signifier always simplifying the signified. Nel rejects even wishes, though, ending by deciding that the four repetitions of Peace are "longings," a word which implies deeply felt but inchoate and largely ineffable desires for some remote or even unachievable object. The longing for peace encoded in the novel's structure is a response to the several different kinds of war

in which the novel's characters are caught up: actual armed conflict among nations; legal, economic, and social war against black people by the society in which they live, sometimes taking the form of armed (on one side) conflict; and hostility toward black women, so palpable that it forces them to discover in early childhood that "they [are] neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph [is] forbidden to them" (52).

Despite its title, *Sula* actually has three protagonists: Shadrack, Sula/Nel, and the community of black people who live in the Bottom. These three protagonists are at the centers of different but overlapping and intricately interconnected plots that in turn convey various aspects of the anti-war theme. To be more explicit, Shadrack represents the impinging of the outside world on the black people of Medallion through war, the army being "the first of capitalism's modern industrial machines to incorporate black men" (Willis 276), and his plot concerns the futile attempt to control death and chaos. The Sula/Nel couple—the two sides of a "Janus' head" that together would make one woman (Parker 253)—are the center of the plot about female friendship and female development and represent the effects of internalized racist stereotypes and the multiple oppression of black women. The community as a whole enacts the recent history of black people in the United States and represents some possible responses to social otherness. This tripling of plot, center, and theme is announced in the final sentence of the novel's prologue: "They [the black people of the Bottom] were mightily preoccupied with earthly things—and each other, wondering even as early as 1920 what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about, tucked up there in the Bottom" (6). The role of the reader of *Sula* is to share this preoccupation with "earthly things" and to wonder, with the townspeople, what is Shadrack all about? what are Sula and Nel all about? what are the townspeople all about? These questions guide our reading of the novel, in which Morrison offers not answers, but ways of developing our responses to the central questions.

The many deaths in *Sula* reinforce the anti-war theme, as each is linked to one or more of the novel's centers. The deaths of the nameless soldier and of Plum Peace are results of World War I, as the blame for Plum's death rests not on Eva, who soaks him with kerosene and lights the match, but on those horrors he experienced in war that drove him to seek oblivion through heroin. The actual deaths of Cecile Sabat, Chicken Little, Hannah, and Sula; the metaphoric deaths of Nel's inner self and of Sula's and Nel's

friendship; and Sula's fantasy of murdering Ajax are linked to the social war on black women. Cecile's death is important less for Cecile's sake than for Nel's, as the train journey to New Orleans teaches Nel about the humiliations in store for any black woman, no matter how beautiful or how well-bred, who ventures into the wider world. Three years after this trip Nel acts out her fury at her position in life, and especially at the mother's role, by acting to gain some kind of freedom as she and Sula taunt Chicken Little, who slips out of Sula's hands and plunges into the river to his death: Nel wanted to be free of him, and now she is. Hannah burns while tending to a conventionally feminine task, preserving fruit. Sula dies, I would argue, because death seems her only option for freedom; she and the townspeople together seem to will her death. The death of Nel's inner self and the death of her friendship with Sula are both attributable to externally imposed limitations on black women's lives, while Sula's desire to destroy Ajax is part of a pattern of danger resulting from the denial of creative agency. The other deaths—of the people on National Suicide Day in 1941—are linked both to the racist war on black people in the U.S. and to armed conflict, as it is Shadrack who established National Suicide Day upon his return from war. In no chapter can we escape death and destruction. This is what war is, the novel seems to say, and it is not so limited as conventional definitions would have it, nor is it ever glamorous, romantic, or heroic: It is everywhere, and it is terrifyingly ugly.

The chapter that immediately follows the prologue focuses on Shadrack, "blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917" in France (7), where he saw a soldier's face blown off and his faceless body continue to run into battle—or perhaps away from battle: This was Shadrack's first encounter with "the enemy," and he wasn't sure whether his company was advancing or retreating. Suffering from what usually is euphemistically referred to as shell shock or battle fatigue but here is clearly presented as actual madness, the only possible response to the horrors of war, Shadrack is rapidly discharged from a veterans' hospital after an episode of violence. The chaos he has witnessed in the world seems to have invaded even his own body; he thinks that "anything could be anywhere," and imagines his hands growing to monstrous proportions (9).

War has formed a vast, unbridgeable divide in his life, permanently separating his old self from what he now is: "Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was . . . with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb,

no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do . . . he was sure of one thing only: the unchecked monstrosity of his hands" (12). This definition by negation, with its almost ritualistic chanting of "no," its insistent affirmation of what is absent, places Shadrack the returning soldier in relationship to his enslaved ancestors; just as slavery brutally attempted to strip people of past, language, tribe, possessions, so does war. Shadrack's story, then, functions as a modern slave narrative, even repeating the structure of slave narratives, which usually describe a series of journeys—from the ancestral land to slavery in the Southern United States to freedom, of sorts, in the north.² Each part of the slave's journey includes an attempt to reconstitute a tribe or community under adverse circumstances, which is what Shadrack attempts to do in the Bottom. In important ways, Shadrack is much like the questing figure of romance and therefore is linked to Sula, whose journey, like Shadrack's, is a quest for self; each of these quests is complicated by social, political, and economic forces over which the quester has little control, symbolized here by Shadrack's perceived lack of control over his own body. Unlike his Biblical namesake, this Shadrack has not been saved whole from the fire.

The journey motif inaugurated in *Sula* by Shadrack's largely unsuccessful attempt to retrieve the self blasted by World War I is an ironic comment on conventional quest tales, in which the male protagonist frequently fulfills his desire for adventure and achieves adulthood through physical combat. Many of the male characters in *Sula* leave the Bottom in search of adventure or to prove their manhood in ways denied them at home. Plum, like Shadrack, fights in the First World War; all we know of his experiences is that they were so horrific that he sought oblivion through heroin. Morrison structures Plum's story to parallel his response to war with Shadrack's: Both National Suicide Day and heroin addiction represent rejections of the world as it is and futile, self-defeating attempts to reorder that world, to make it less chaotic and less terrifying. Although Plum at least remembers his immediate past and his source—after trying to forget them by staying away from home upon his return from war—he attempts to eradicate his present through heroin, which enables him to effect the regression to a comparatively safe childhood he so desperately desires. Eva's murder of Plum, which she defends as an effort to save him, cuts off his retreat to infancy and echoes the motives behind infanticide during slavery.³ There are intimations that Ajax's quest for freedom

and adventure will end in his destruction as well. The novel leaves him in 1939, setting off for Dayton to gaze at his beloved airplanes, a love that may plausibly lead him to enlist to serve in World War II.

With the exception of Nel's father, who nevertheless spends almost no time at home due to the demands of his job as a cook on a Great Lakes line that puts him in port only three days out of every sixteen (17), all of the male characters in *Sula* are in flight from the traditional responsibilities of adulthood, although several paradoxically see themselves as proving their manhood. Eva's husband Boy Boy abandons his wife and three children to seek adventure in the city, returning home many years later with a symbol of his success, a woman in a flashy dress, to display in Eva's yard. Even his name, the redundant remark on a kind of eternal childhood, places Boy Boy outside adult life. At the same time, though, by echoing a racist epithet for adult black males, this name reminds the reader of the circumstances that entrap black men in an economic dependency that replicates childhood. The three Deweys, whose abnormal shortness (four feet) mirrors their stunted emotional and intellectual growth, are the novel's most extreme versions of childish men. They remain unable to care for themselves for as long as they live, expecting Eva and then Sula to provide their food, shelter, and clothing—to mother them, in short, a task Sula accepts only briefly, during her infatuation with Ajax.

The mothering Jude expects from Nel is of a more complicated variety, but it is mothering nonetheless. Jude marries Nel when his hopes of proving his masculinity through building the New River Road are dashed by racist hiring policies. Jude thinks of building the road as "real work. . . . He wanted to swing the pick or kneel down with the string or shovel the gravel. His arms ached for something heavier than trays, for something dirtier than peelings; his feet wanted the heavy work shoes. . . ." (81-82). When he realizes that he is permanently barred from such work due to race, he turns to Nel for solace. Morrison is explicit about Jude's motives for marrying: ". . . it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to hold him, deep enough to rock him. . . . And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother" (82). In turn, Nel marries Jude because she realizes that he needs her; that is, she colludes in the eradication of her self in a marriage in which she is meant to be a part of Jude.

The marriage of Nel and Jude demonstrates the crippling effects of several types of oppression: Both are victims in the racist war against black people, but Nel doubly so because Jude sees the only escape from oppression as residing in the oppression of another. Both have internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the white capitalist society that says that one's value as a man is determined by one's work and by that work's economic rewards, including ownership of a woman and children, and that one's value as a woman is determined by one's ability to attract a man and then to provide that man with children. Many black male writers have written about the determined, programmatic emasculation of black men by white capitalist society, but Morrison, along with other black women writers, redefines the problem. James Baldwin, to offer just one example, bitterly condemns the racism that figuratively, and frequently literally, castrates black men, asserting in *No Name in the Street*, a text contemporaneous with *Sula*, that "a man's balance depends on the weight he carries between his legs. . . . the word *genesis* describes the male, involves the phallus, and refers to the seed which gives life" (64). "The slave," adds Baldwin, "knows, however his master may be deluded on this point, that he is called a slave because his manhood has been, or can be, or will be taken away from him. To be a slave means that one's manhood is engaged in a dubious battle indeed In the case of American slavery, the black man's right to his women, as well as to his children, was simply taken from him" (62).

In *Sula*, Morrison tacitly argues that the terms in which such protests are couched betray the tragic fact that black men remain trapped in the white man's nightmare. To think of relations between men and women as "the black man's *right to his* women" (my emphasis) is to enlist on the side of the oppressors by agreeing to participate in a system that perceives women primarily as the objects of exchange between men, with the effect of poisoning relations between black men and black women.⁴ The passage quoted from Baldwin defines the slave as a male, both by the use of the male pronoun and by the emphasis on "manhood," ignoring the fact that black women also were enslaved while focusing exclusively on what slavery meant to men. This focus eclipses black women's history, doing to black women something close to what war did to Shadrack and what slavery tried to do to all black people: leaving them with "no past, no language, no tribe, no source." To the extent that Baldwin's phrasing of the problem is representative of texts written by black men in the 1960s and early '70s—and I think that it is—, it illustrates the ways in which black women are multiply

oppressed, by the dominant culture and, far more painfully, by their own brothers, fathers, sons. *Sula* shows the men of the Bottom, with the sole exception of Ajax, turning to women for support, but offering very little support or even acknowledgment in return.

Early in her life, Sula sees a problem between men and women but is unable to articulate it until she returns to the Bottom from her mysterious ten-year journey. When she is twelve, her response to Shadrack's "always" is sheer terror, because this seems to condemn her to a future in which nothing changes, and she longs for change, since she does not want to live as the women of the Bottom do, in thrall to male needs, male desires, male rules. This is the day on which she determines to lead "an experimental life," the day on which she and Nel enact a rite of passage into adult sexuality through their ritualistic digging in the earth with twigs (58), the day "her mother's remarks [that she loves but does not like Sula] sent her flying up those stairs," the day "her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle" (118). At twelve, she learns that "there was no other that you could count on" and "that there was no self to count on either" (118-19). Her travels, particularly her experiences with men, make her realize that "a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman" (121). Sula thinks of Nel not as an "other," but as a second self, but Nel betrays her by choosing a man and marriage over their friendship (Jude over the self, in other words).

When Sula walks away from Nel's and Jude's wedding "with just a hint of a strut" (85), not to be seen again in the Bottom for ten years, she is embarking on a foredoomed quest for types of friendship and of selfhood that she finally discovers to be impossible. In college, and in Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego, Sula is looking for a replacement for Nel, who had been to Sula "the closest thing to both an other and a self" (119), but she learns "that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand" (121). Sula makes the double mistake of thinking that other places are different from Medallion in ways that would significantly affect her personal possibilities and of believing that she will be able to find a self by exploring the wider world. Her disillusionment is expressed in an apparently enigmatic comment to Nel, who tells Sula that she has been away for too long. "Not too long, but maybe too far," Sula replies (96). Nel finds this incomprehensible, and Sula is either unable or unwilling to explain

herself further, but her reasoning is not very difficult to follow: She has traveled too far, seen too many places, to retain any hope that somewhere, in some place as yet unknown, she might find the object of her quest. Her journey has convinced her that every city "held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat" (120)—there is no promised land of freedom to look toward.

Although Sula eventually scorns Nel's rootedness and respectability, thinking that Nel is now like the other townspeople who fear being truly alive (120), Sula's deepest desire is to *be* Nel. In childhood, Sula loved Nel's oppressively neat house and seemed to want to change places with her friend. It is Nel who draws Sula back to Medallion, and Nel who keeps her there, despite their estrangement. As she is dying, Sula reflects on her badly managed attempts to imitate Nel, which "always ended up in some action noteworthy not for its coolness but mostly for its being bizarre" (141). The wish to be Nel is what drives Sula into her sexual experimentation with Jude, which she later describes as an attempt to fill up "this space in front of me, behind me, in my head" (144). The space Sula confronts is her absence of a "center, [a] speck around which to grow" (119); she has no true inner core of self and tries to appropriate Nel's by doing what Nel does, including having sex with Jude. Morrison at one point refers to Sula as an "artist with no art form," whose "craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination" (121). Nel, then, substitutes in Sula's life for paints, clay, music, or even words, serving as the material out of which Sula tries to create both a self and a way of expressing that self. This absence of a creative outlet seems linked to Sula's status as a black woman, for black women's artistic desires and talents were often driven underground by the hostility of the dominant culture, as Alice Walker so movingly details in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens." Then, too, Sula grows up in a community in which a woman's art is her domestic work, her care of family and home. In a weird way, Jude and then Ajax become the subjects of Sula's experiments with Nel-like domesticity; if Nel can find a self through a relationship with a man—as it appears to Sula—, then Sula is willing to try to do so as well. In spite of her deathbed claim that she "sure did live in this world" and her insistence that she owns herself (143), Sula never reaches real self-understanding because she has no abiding self to understand nor any way of creating a self. She needs Nel to verify herself and to be whole, as her post-death musings (surely the oddest feature of the novel) suggest: "Well, I'll be damned . . . it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (149).

Nel finally does reach self-understanding, and it is Sula who leads her to it; her recognition of her true feelings provides her with that speck around which to grow, symbolized by the scattering of spores from the gray ball that has previously hovered in her peripheral vision. Just as Sula wanted to be Nel, Nel once wanted to be Sula, preferring Sula's family and home to her own and needing Sula to verify her feelings. However, unlike Sula, Nel gives up this wish when she surrenders her self by allowing her "response to Jude's shame and anger select . . . her away from Sula. . . . greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (84). Here Nel makes an interpretative error equivalent to those that sent Sula away from Medallion: Jude not only fails to see Nel singly, he fails to see her at all, seeing only "himself taking shape in her eyes" (83). Nel becomes the center around which Jude and the children grow, herself adopting a conventionally feminine role of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. She eventually loses the ability to know her own feelings and, like Sula, tries to fill up space with another, in this case her children.

From the moment that she banishes Sula and Jude, Nel is haunted by "something just to the right of her, in the air, just out of view. She could not see it, but she knew exactly what it looked like. A gray ball hovering just there. Just there. To the right. Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence" (108-09). This gray ball is a physical manifestation of her own feelings, which she is afraid to examine, choosing instead to attribute her grief to a conventionally understood and accepted source. Nel convinces herself that it is Jude she will miss, Jude who knew her, and Jude whose departure leaves an emptiness in her, but it is actually Sula. Nearly three decades later, after Eva tells Nel that she and Sula were "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" and then calls her "Sula," as if to emphasize their interchangeability (169), Nel is finally able to face the real source of her grief. As she stands at Sula's grave, the gray ball breaks and "scatter[s] like dandelion spores in the breeze," and Nel cries out, "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" (174). This epiphany comes at the very end of the book and provides the most optimistic ending of any of Morrison's novels with the exception of *Beloved*, leaving open the possibility that Nel may now grow, freed from the lies in which she has held herself prisoner, and may discover the inner peace that has thus far eluded her.⁵

Both Nel and Sula are influenced in adult life by their maternal inheritances, each enacting to an extreme degree the meaning of adult womanhood that her mother has shown her. Despite Nel's

early rejection of her mother and attraction to her disreputable grandmother, Nel follows her mother into conventionality, her wedding to Jude serving as "the culmination of all [Helene] had been, thought or done in this world" (79). Sula easily takes and just as easily discards new sexual partners, following Hannah's old pattern but without Hannah's affection for the men involved. Nel merges with the community; Sula becomes its center.

Sula becomes the speck around which the townspeople grow, at least temporarily, in reaction to her having violated their most basic rules, chief among them the dicta against sexual relationships with white men and against disrespecting the elderly. Town gossip holds that Sula has done the unforgivable, slept with white men; this is a sin against the belief that black men "own" black women, that a woman's sexuality is not her own to control. Sula's placing Eva in a nursing home violates the community value of taking care of one's own. Hannah may have slept with married men and Eva may have cut off her own leg for money and killed her son, but neither was ostracized by the folk because neither treated community standards contemptuously—both remained "womanly." Sula's real crime is her complete disregard of her womanly responsibilities, as defined by her community; Sula steps outside the circle of community and becomes a pariah. Convinced that Sula is evil, the townspeople unite against her, making her the scapegoat for all their many troubles: "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" (117-18). Sula is not, of course, the source of the townspeople's problems, but she is certainly a convenient scapegoat, far easier to fight against than would be the complex, faceless, virtually unknowable social system of exclusion that oppresses them. Sula may even represent this social system to the townspeople, as her behavior is "white" by their standards. The possibility of running Sula out of town and thereby solving their problems never occurs to the people of the Bottom, although such banishment is part of American mythology and indeed American history. The novel describes mob actions like lynching as peculiar to whites, simultaneously implying that black ethics are superior to the looser moral code holding sway in the dominant culture: "There was no creature so ungodly as to make them destroy it. They could kill easily if provoked to anger, but not by design, which explained why they could not 'mob kill' anyone" (118).

Religious faith, residing in a version of Christian mythology that reinterprets the Trinity as a quartet, with the fourth face of God being Satan, informs the lives of the Bottom's people. Morrison's depiction of folk belief in *Sula* insists that Christian faith offers only an explanation of evil and of God's apparent indifference to black suffering, not a justification for that suffering. However, Christian belief defines freedom as loss of self, teaching that one may find the Lord only through abandonment of the self; furthermore, it instructs believers to regard earthy suffering as a small price to pay for the joys of the afterlife and to perceive death not as an end, but as a beginning. *Sula* does not comment directly on Christian theology, but the promised freedom of the afterlife does seem to undergird the people's refusal to lose faith. They are determined "not to let anything—anything at all: not failed crops, not rednecks, lost jobs, sick children, rotten potatoes, broken pipes, bug-ridden flour, third-class coal, educated social workers, thieving insurance men, garlic-ridden hunkies, corrupt Catholics, racist Protestants, cowardly Jews, slaveholding Moslems, jackleg nigger preachers, squeamish Chinamen, cholera, dropsy or the Black Plague, let alone a strange woman—keep them from their God" (150). This list, a stylistic device of which Morrison is fond, has the rhythm and the imaginative energy of a particularly stirring sermon, at once asserting the enormity of the sufferings that black people have endured and reducing them by diminishing the differences among them: Accidents of nature and premeditated human evil are equated as potential barriers between a people and their God, and are treated as challenges that must be met for the sake of both spiritual and physical survival. The "Black Plague" that serves as the penultimate item on the list seems both a hyperbolic comment on the visitations of evil the people will overcome and an ironic summation of what comes before it: a plague striking at blacks, a war on black people. The faith stressed here is reinforced, even vindicated, by the Bottom's outlasting Sula.

Once Sula dies, the Bottom ceases to be a cohesive community. Her death brings first general relief and then "restless irritability":

. . . 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. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. . . . Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. And even those Negroes who had moved down from Canada to Medallion, who remarked every chance they got that they had never been slaves, felt a loosening

of the reactionary compassion for Southern-born blacks Sula had inspired in them. They returned to their original claims of superiority. (153-54)

The people of the Bottom require something or someone to define themselves against, some common enemy to bind them to each other, a situation analogous to the surge of patriotism countries experience in war time. With Sula alive, they unite; with Sula dead, they divide against each other again. The common enemy that they fail to identify correctly in this case is the Depression, which we are told came late to the Bottom, but which also affected black people as a whole far more severely than it did whites, given the impoverished conditions under which many blacks already lived. The Bottom's people indulge in self-hatred and self-blame when they make Sula a pariah; scapegoating Sula is a very particular enactment of the multiple oppression of black women, as Sula is blamed for conditions under which she also suffers. Turning rage inward, striking at the self or at those nearest to the self instead of at the real oppressor, is one possible, and extremely dangerous, response to oppression.

Ultimately, many of those who hated Sula reveal their despairing self-hatred when they join in Shadrack's National Suicide Day. It is the middle of the most difficult winter in memory, and they don't know what to do. They attempt to strike back at the nameless, faceless system of exploitation that is responsible for their current predicament by killing "the tunnel they were forbidden to build" (161), but this futile gesture causes their own destruction when the tunnel collapses and many die. The tunnel is a symbol of the repeatedly awakened and repeatedly dashed hopes of the people, the place "where their hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise: leaf-dead" (161). It is another awakening of those hopes that leads people to join Shadrack's bizarre parade. The hope the people share is actually a hope for freedom from oppression—for peace—which enables them to endure that oppression. It is "the same hope that kept them picking beans for other farmers; kept them from finally leaving as they talked of doing; kept them knee-deep in other people's dirt; kept them excited about other people's wars; kept them solicitous of white people's children; kept them convinced that some magic 'government' was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars" (160). Although *white* appears in this list only once, I think it must be read into each recurring "other" as well: It is white farmers for whom black people sharecropped, white people for whom black women worked as domestics, white people who started those wars, and white people, most damningly, who run the dubious "government" that has failed

to "lift them [blacks] up." It is white people in general who wage war against black people. The people who die at the tunnel and those who will die in World War II are equally victims of other people's wars; they share in dreams deferred and promises repeatedly broken by the ruling class. The three centers and plots of *Sula* connect here as the anti-war theme is most forcefully presented in a chapter set on the eve of American engagement in the Second World War, with responsibility for the destruction of many black people laid firmly on the white ruling class, the very same people who run the government and start the wars. There are no important white characters in *Sula*, no individualized white people, but when we do see white people in the text—instead of hovering just outside its borders, like Nel's gray ball—, they are consistently shown as sharing the dominant culture's hatred of blacks, from the conductor who humiliates Helene on the train to the three boys who threaten Sula and Nel to the barge operator who mistreats Chicken Little's corpse.

The leaving that the people are said to have spoken of in the passage quoted above is probably of two sorts: leaving the Bottom for an industrial, more northern city, paralleling the migration of many black people throughout this century but most especially in war time, and leaving the United States for Africa. This last is suggested by the dating of the death of hopes in 1927, the year that Marcus Garvey was deported to Jamaica, effectively ending a vibrant Black Nationalist movement until its revival in the 1960s. The last, devastating National Suicide Day takes place in 1941, the year many black men would be called to fight in another one of those wars and would respond to that call with the hope that after *this* war, full civil rights would be theirs, while other black men and women would fight discrimination in the defense industry (Giddings 237).

Sula effectively ends in 1941, with the final chapter functioning as an epilogue that brings us up to 1965. The intervening twenty-four years have proved the end of the Bottom as Nel and Sula knew it. Black people have abandoned the Bottom, which is rapidly becoming a wealthy white area; the black people who made some money during World War II moved to the valley, now considered less desirable by whites. The epilogue begins ominously: "Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed" (163). The obvious implication is that things are *not* any better in 1965 than they were in 1941, or in 1919 for that matter, the recent Civil Rights Movement and rebirth of Black Nationalism notwithstanding. Nel notices black people holding jobs from which they were previously excluded—

dime store clerk, junior high school teacher—, but the new young people remind her of the Deweys, a damning comparison that consigns the young to eternal youth and that calls into question the value and permanency of those rights gained between 1941 and 1965. By 1965, the year that saw the assassination of Malcolm X, the Civil Rights Movement was splintering into many different movements, each responding differently to the recognition that legal rights were not in themselves likely to end centuries of oppression. Nineteen sixty-five was the year that Watts burned, beginning two years of violence in urban ghettos, events which seem foreshadowed in *Sula* by the riot at the tunnel and which force us to see that believing things to be better in 1965 than in 1941 is falling prey to delusion. The third of the three interconnected plots of *Sula*, the one that centers on the black residents of the Bottom, is a story of collective, externally imposed stasis, designed to be read as a corrective to illusory hope. The novel implies that all growth is personal and that all true hope must therefore reside in the personal and in extensions of the personal—that is, in cooperative action rooted in personal relationships, not in faith in the magical possibilities of a government or even of a movement.

I do not mean to suggest here that *Sula* is in any sense a complete history of black people in the U.S. or even that the novel at any point corresponds exactly with a particular moment in that history. Morrison uses dates of chapters and comments on social changes to gesture toward history, which serves as a context for events in the novel. In many important ways, *Sula* operates as a mythological reworking of recent black American history, with the title drawing attention to the one character most determined to break free of that history, refusing all the roles and limitations thrust upon her. Sula, though, rejects not only external limitations but also love and community, thereby severely restricting her own potential for growth, engaging in a personal war with the world. Unloved and unloving, dead finally of a mysterious wasting disease similar to those that punished unconventional nineteenth-century heroines, Sula is the hero of the novel, a solitary seeker trying to make her own self. This is not to say that Sula is the most admirable character in the novel; Morrison calls into question the whole concept of the hero while placing Sula in the hero's position in the text. *Sula* suggests that a traditional hero is not a very desirable thing to be, showing the hero to be isolated, lacking in self-understanding, unable to acknowledge needs of self or of others, and, not incidentally, dead young. The tripled center of the novel implies another possibility, redefining the hero and the self: Just as the real

hero of this text is a composite creation, comprising Shadrack, Sula/Nel, and the townspeople, so the self is revisioned as communal, not solitary. Morrison's novel ultimately asserts the value of communality, of love against death, of peace against war, as we see Nel at Sula's grave accepting the past, her love of Sula, and her own weaknesses, an acceptance that may lead her to peace and to freedom.

Notes

¹Fable, Christian 153 ff.; lesbian novel, Smith 168-85; *bildungsroman*, Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 11; heroic quest, Stein 146; historical novel, Willis "Eruptions of Funk" 263-84.

²I am indebted for this parallel to Susan Willis's discussion of women writers' use of slave narratives ("Black Women Writers" 219-20). *Beloved*, in which Morrison returns to *Sula*'s central themes, also repeats the structure of a slave narrative, with Paul D. and Sethe telling their stories of life in slavery, escape, and illusory freedom in Cincinnati.

³For reports of infanticide during slavery, see Giddings 44-46. A mother who attempts to save her child from a life that seems worse than death is placed at the center of *Beloved*. Sethe, a runaway slave, sees slavecatchers coming toward her house and instantly begins killing her children, succeeding in slashing her daughter's throat before others intervene to save the three remaining children. Like Eva, Sethe acts out of love; unlike Eva, Sethe is rejected by her community for this action and legally prosecuted. The dilemma Morrison treats is clearer in *Beloved* than in *Sula*: Sethe may have done the right thing, yet she has no right—morally or legally—to do it.

⁴Giddings incorporates discussion of this issue within her overall analysis of black women's history, and I am indebted to her treatment of this issue and to her work generally.

⁵Like all of Morrison's endings, though, the close of *Sula* is ambiguous. It is possible to see Nel's cry not as the beginning of a discovery of peace, but as what Spillers calls "the onset of a sickness-unto-death," provoked by a remorse that can never again be escaped (311).

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