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A Study on the Writing Skills of Toni Morrison

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Abstract – Toni Morrison uses a language full of metaphors and images to present the patriarchal oppression in her books. In an interview with Nellie Y. McKay, Morrison observes, —I tend not to explain things very much, but I long for a critic who will know what I mean when I say _church‘ or _community,‘ or when I say _ancestor,‘ or _chorus.‘ Because my books come out of those things and represent how they function in the [B]lack cosmology.

Morrison‘s writing requires that the reader have some knowledge of the African American community and its traditions. For this reason, she does not provide the details she assumes the reader already knows. She wants the reader to intervene, fill in the missing gaps and be able to understand the unwritten words of an oral language. Marc C. Conner argues, —The reader is not told where the conversation is taking place—at a card table, in the kitchen, or over a backyard fence. Morrison leaves spaces for the reader to fill. She knows that there will be _holes and spaces‘ in the text that are caused by writing down an oral language, but Morrison also expects the reader to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge.

Keywords: Writing, Women, Tradition

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INTRODUCTION

Reading and understanding the black English oral tradition requires a thorough knowledge of the black community that speaks this language. This requirement gives Morrison‘s writing the reputation of being complex. However, this complexity also encourages the reader to treat the text as a piece of conversation. Conner explains, The reader who is aware of the Black English oral tradition is also aware that he/she is obligated to participate in this conversation. The participation could be a —humhll at the end of the dialogue signifying understanding and appreciation, or it could be a smile, a laugh, a head wag, or it could put you in the mind of other women who shared their lives through conversation with friends.

Conversation with the text allows for an understanding of the message in Sula and the meaning of the girlhood friendship at its center. This metaphorical language helps convey the message of female solidarity that goes beyond the literal features of Sula and Nel‘s bonding. In Sula, the struggles to maintain female friendship become a metaphor for the fight against racial, class and gender prejudice. Aware of the oppression going on in their community but unable to resolve it directly, Sula and Nel take advantage of the nurturing and caring aspects of their friendship that provide them with security and comfort. They come to understand their misfortunes related to gender and race and to find something in their friendship which nobody can deny them but themselves. This is why the friendship represents an open challenge to everything denied to them because it is their own. This sense of ownership restores their dignity and even empowers them through the recognition of their efforts as they struggle to build a sisterhood despite social challenges. The narrator observes, —So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be.

Sula and Nel form bonds as a response to oppression, and they unite their forces and even their selves in order to survive. In its early pages at least, then, Sula suggests that female bonding, by enabling solidarity, caring and nurturing in the community, can bring healing and survival. One way in which Sula demonstrates the socially transformative power of female bonding is through its depiction of how Nel and Sula defend and protect one another. For instance, Sula‘s willingness to defend Nel from the Irish boys‘ harassment prompts her to cut her own finger. Some critics have found this act morally irresponsible. As Jane Bakerman writes, —While,

in a sense, she has solved the immediate problem and while the girls have become ‗blood sisters,' she has reacted with the violence which she can act, she does so irresponsibly.

But Sula's desperate attempt to protect her friend has broader historical and social implications. Specifically, Sula's self-immolation repeats the act of her grandmother, Eva, when she supposedly put her leg under a train in order to collect insurance. Eva sacrificed her leg for the sake of her children because her main aim was to help her children survive. Even though Sula's actions are repulsive even to Nel, who fails to understand Sula' s motives, the act of cutting her finger shows the significance of Sula's love for Nel. The act reveals the intensity of their friendship and how far Sula can go for the sake of a friend.

Sula courageously endures the pain because she will not let anybody hurt Nel. As a result of the horror of the act, Sula succeeds in scaring the boys off, proving the value of friendship in establishing protection in the case of broad social threats. As Sula literally sacrifices a piece of herself in order to help Nel, the latter also has an opportunity to protect Sula. A crucial event in the novel, Chicken Little' s drowning, is significant in the girls' bonding because it seals a pact of confidentiality between them—one in which Nel decides to share responsibility for a crime committed by Sula.

After Hannah's comments stating that she loves Sula but does not like her send them to the beach, Sula and Nel first play while digging holes in the sand before getting distracted by the arrival of Chicken Little. The boy draws their attention and they start to play with him by swinging him from a tree. Unfortunately, Chicken loses his balance and gets thrown far into the river. This dramatic event causes panic especially in Sula, who is responsible for the act. After a moment of confusion, both Sula and Nel head home, leaving behind them their playmate, who drowns. Without prior discussion or arrangement, they decide to remain silent. Indeed, Nelputs her friendship with Sula ahead of her duties as a citizen to report crimes to the police. She is not worried about an eventual guilty conscience for sharing the secret of the death of a child, but is more concerned about preserving the bond with her friend.

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Kubitschek observes, —Nel and Sula thus join forces to affirm for each other the personal worth that the surrounding racism and sexism deny. When Nel and Sula silently agree to keep their involvement in a playmate's drowning a secret, their reliance on each other is confirmed. For each, the other is the only person who knows her completely. This death tests the strength of their childhood sisterhood over the course of the three day search for Chicken Little and afterward, as they learn that friends share not only good events but bad ones as well. The narrator describes the funeral: Nel and Sula stood some distance away from the grave, the space that had sat between them in the pews had dissolved. They held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay above ground forever.

At first as they stood there, their hands were clenched together. They relaxed slowly until during the walk back home their fingers were laced in as gentle a clasp as that of any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter.

Chicken Little is dead and buried but the secret of his death secures the friendship between Sula and Nel. This special event of Chicken Little's drowning represents one of the strongest moments of their bonding. As the saying goes, the best friends are not those who hang around in happy times, but the ones who stay during difficult periods. Sula and Nel share and keep their secret, thus demonstrating a remarkable sense of solidarity. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems argue, —By providing Sula and Nel with the secret of Chicken Little's accidental death, and specifically by having Nel provide the strength and support Sula needed at the moment, Morrison further united them in a manner that would bond them for eternity. Although the action was Sula's, the involvement, as Eva would later point out, was clearly theirs together.

The girls' mutual 36 involvement in the death is solidified when Nel's silence seals her complicity. This test to their friendship raises a moral issue regarding the boundaries of a friend's obligation to another, but interestingly, this dilemma never occurs to Nel, who supports her friend apparently without ever doubting herself. Jan Furman reflects on how, in Morrison's depiction, the need for friendship prevails over conventional notions of justice: In examining their friendship, Morrison tests its endurance. As she says, not much had been done with women as friends; men's relationships are often the subject of fiction, but what about women's strongest bonds? As perfect complements, one incomplete without the other, Sula and Nel together face life, death, and marriage, and eventually they also must face separation. Throughout, Morrison affirms the necessity of their collaboration.

The decision to keep the secret reveals the intensity of a —collaboration‖ that overpowers justice. Similar to criminal circumstances in other Morrison novels, such as Dorcas' murder in Jazz or the women's assault in Paradise the guilty here do not serve jail time because more crucial issues are at stake. Nel places trust and confidence in Sula and vows to protect her from any danger of being reported to the police. In Sula Morrison draws attention to the strength of female friendship by showing how the need to empower these young

girls takes priority over all other social and moral responsibilities.

Morrison herself does not agree with a lesbian reading of Sula but, instead, encourages us to see that women and girls in particular may nurture strong bonding without being sexually involved. More important than its possible homoerotic undertone, however, is the fact that Nel and Sula's girlhood relationship helps these protagonists survive estranged mother-daughter relationships. Realizing that their mothers are too demanding or do not provide them with the care they need, Sula and Nel build a female bond that grants them much comfort. Their mutual commitment helps them survive their mothers' lack of concern or demands. The narrator asserts, —Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for‖ (Sula 52).

As the self-proclaimed embodiment of morality, Nel's mother, Helene, is conventional and law-abiding. A member of the church, she embraces the conservative values of her community and raises her daughter according to the same values, even though this upbringing becomes clearly oppressive. By contrast, Sula's mother, Hannah, is sexually free and openly challenges moral conventions, particularly regarding male/female relationships. This freedom grants her a certain degree of autonomy but also explains why she does not care for Sula or raise her according to the rules of society. Left on her own, Sula suffers from this abandonment in a manner that parallels Nel's resistance to her mother's overly restrictive rules. The difference between Helene and Hannah is crucial to the future of the girls they raise, but what is emphasized by Morrison's depiction of girlhood friendship in Sula is the way that both women ultimately fail to care for and nurture their daughters. This lack of maternal care is ultimately filled by the friendship that develops between Sula and Nel. While Nel struggles against her mother's constant demands, Sula faces her mother's neglect; however, their bond allows both of them to overcome this experience and succeed in building new identities.

Raised by a pious Christian grandmother, Helene strives hard to make Nel a good example of an ideal woman as expected by the community. Helene utterly rejects any connection with her own mother, a Creole prostitute whom she despises for her immorality. Constantly on alert for any sign in Nel that may represent the bad blood she resents in her mother, Helene subjects Nel to a very rigorous upbringing that makes her docile and passive. This upbringing is very hard on Nel, who suffers under her mother's rules. The narrator observes, —During all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula‖ (Sula 83).

DISCUSSION

Meanwhile, Sula suffers from her mother's distance from and indifference toward her. Caring more for her lovers than her daughter, Hannah neglects Sula. Aware of Hannah's —loose‖ manners, Helene strives to protect Nel from the environment of temptation which Sula's house represents, but Hannah's lack of care ultimately facilitates her daughter's friendship with Sula. Sula, in turn, finds in her friendship with Nel the comfort and nurturing her mother fails to provide her. Diane Gillespie and Missy DehnKubitschek reflect, —The friendship between Sula and Nel in many ways nurtures both girls by supplying the lacks in their mother-daughter relationships.

For instance, Nel's voice awakens Sula from the anger and sadness of Hannah's comments about how she loves Sula but just does not like her. Talking with her friend about her daughter, Hannah states, —You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her‖ (Sula 57). These comments sadden Sula considerably until Nel's voice brings her back to reality by simply calling her. The narrator sums up this experience as follows, —She [Sula] only heard Hannah's words, and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye. Nel's call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts back into the bright, hot daylight‖(Sula 57). These comments indicate the kind of relationship Hannah has with her daughter, who suffers from these words. Sula does not nurture female solidarity with her mother, who hurts her emotionally through her comments. Instead, when the mother who was supposed to provide her with care and security fails her, her dear friend, Nel, rescues her from the breakdown brought on by her mother's remarks. The failure of the mother-daughter relationships in Sula contrasts with the success of Nel and Sula's girlhood friendship.

The simple presence of one girl provides the other with support and comfort. Without being aware of the reason for Sula's pain, Nel's mere voice and presence soothes the pain that her mother's comments cause, elevating Sula from despair to joy at being with her friend. Afterward, emotionally shaken by this painful experience, Sula needs Nel in order to survive.

As Morrison note, —Nel's confidence and Sula's insecurity formed the foundation of the reciprocity that characterized their friendship, providing them with the most important relationship in their lives‖ (44). The care and compassion Nel offers Sula during this difficult time greatly contributes to her recovery. In turn, Sula also helps Nel face her mother's control and unreasonable demands. Sula and Nel's friendship not only allows them to empower each other, it also helps them develop

new senses of identity. Nel in particular experiences different stages of self-development that play a key role in Morrison‘s depiction of girlhood friendship. Her first experience of selfawareness occurs during the tripshe makes with her mother to the South. This trip introduces her to racism, a phenomenon she has never known in her life.

In the segregated train that takes Nel and Helene to New Orleans, Nel discovers her mother‘s weakness and decides from then on to claim her selfhood. When Helene realizes the mistake she makes by entering the white part of the train, she laughs which causes not only the rage of the conductor but also the anger of the black soldiers, who are humiliated by the way her act draws attention to racial boundaries. As the narrator asserts, Nel learns something important from the way the black men look at her mother: —It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly‖ (Sula 11).

Nel does not appreciate her mother‘s laughter either, because it causes the hatred in these men‘s eyes. This experience gives Nel a new awareness of her mother‘s identity as a black woman, who faces the challenge of living in both a racially segregated and patriarchal world. As a result, the episode in the New Orleans train becomes a crucial moment of awakening for Nel regarding both racial and gender identity. In response; however, Nel decides to affirm herself in terms different from those of her mother. She reflects, —‗I‘m me,‘ she whispered. ‗Me.‘ Nel didn‘t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. ‗I‘m me. I‘m not their daughter. I‘m not Nel. I‘m me. Me‘‖ (Sula 28). This new claim makes Nel conscious of who she is. She disassociates herself from her parents because of the shame her mother causes her. She just wants to be herself, not the daughter of this lady whose frailty she has just discovered.

CONCLUSION

The narrator explains Nel‘s plan after this experience: —Leaving Medallion would be her goal. But that was before she met Sula, the girl she had seen for five years at Garfield Primary but never played with, never knew, because her mother said that Sula‘s mother was sooty. The trip, perhaps, or her new found me-ness, gave her the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of her mother‖ (Sula 29). The incident on the train is not the only experience that alienates Nel from her mother. Throughout Nel‘s childhood, Helene imposes on her daughter a conception of beauty defined in terms of the dominant white culture and Caucasian racial characteristics. Helene causes a serious problem of identity in her daughter by denying the essence of her blackness, making her daughter believe that her nose is too broad and therefore ugly. Helene constantly encourages Nel to pull on and reshape her nose, even giving her a clothespin to use for this purpose.

Fortunately, Nel‘s meeting with Sula helps her realize that she does not have to follow her mother‘s wishes that she keep pulling her nose in order to straighten it. Nel‘s defiance of her mother in befriending Sula is rewarding because through it she learns to be her own self despite the different challenges she faces. The narrator explains, —After she met Sula, Nel slid the clothespin under the blanket as soon as she got in the bed. And although there was still the hateful hot comb to suffer through each Saturday evening, its consequences—smooth hair—no longer interested her.

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