

Identity and sexuality in sula: a lacanian reading



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In Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, the characters' attitudes towards their sexualities are shaped by their identity-forming processes. Sula and Nel, despite their similarities, have clashing beliefs about sex due to the vastly different female role models they each grew up with. Their beliefs are further influenced by the preexisting race and gender roles of their society, which created a complicated web of rules and double standards that simultaneously sexualize women while also discouraging them from participating in sexual activity. This results in the formation of inconsistent sexual identities for the protagonists of the novel because they identify with characters who are also struggling to navigate the complex and paradoxical concept of female sexuality. This can be proven through a Lacanian reading of the text, as the older characters in the novel act as imagos for their younger counterparts and help them define their societal roles.

According to Jacques Lacan's essay "The Mirror Stage," a person begins forming an identity when he or she first looks in a mirror and recognizes the image as a representation of the self. Lacan refers to the mirror stage "as an identification" or as "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (Lacan 2). The "transformation" that Lacan is referring to is the formation of one's ego, or sense of self. However, the cardinal mistake that is made during the mirror stage is that the child misrecognizes the image in the mirror, or the imago, as being his- or herself rather than a spectral image. This occurs in the novel when Nel sees herself in the mirror and has a cathartic moment, saying, "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (Morrison 28). This misrecognition becomes the basis for her identity, otherwise known as her personal

narrative. She progresses her narrative through misrecognitions because she continues to identify with various people, or imagos, throughout the story. As a result, her personality begins to diverge from Sula's because identities are influenced by environment and they identify with different characters.

However, identification is not always intentional. For example, Nel does not purposely try to imitate Helene. Rather than forming an identity based off of Helene's, she begins forming identities in relation to other people—first Sula, and then later, Jude. One of the first instances of Nel changing herself because of another person is when Sula visits her home and “ Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it” (Morrison 29). Although she is not consciously trying to bend her personality to match Sula's, she naturally accommodates her in order to connect with her. A more explicit example comes later in the text, when their friendship is described as being “ so close” that “ they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's” (Morrison 83). In this way, Nel is more similar to her mother than she realizes. When they are on the train together and Helene “ smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor” (Morrison 21), she indirectly taught Nel to accommodate and satisfy the needs and wants of others. Despite the fact that Nel is humiliated by her mother's “ foolish smile” and is “ ashamed to sense that these men... were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning but had been born” (Morrison 22), she still echoes this behavior later in her own life. This moment completely alters Nel's perception of her mother, as the text reads, “ if this tall, proud woman, this woman who was very particular about her

friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance, who could quell a roustabout with a look, if she were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (Morrison 22). Nel had never seen her mother sexualized prior to this moment, and it creates a shift in their relationship because it makes Nel realize that " she wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way" and that she will be " on guard–always" (Morrison 22). However, as seen in her later relationship with Jude, Nel cannot avoid the sexualization and stigma that comes with being a black woman in the same way that her mother could not. Another parallel between the two women can be seen in their relationships with men. Helene's life is described in simple terms, as Morrison writes she " loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband" (Morrison 18). Despite the fact that Nel does not openly admit to manipulating Jude, she relies on him in order to create her own identity, like when " she didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle" (Morrison 84). The reliance on Jude to remind her that she is a whole person is in itself is a manipulation of his being.

Unfortunately, Nel is not alone in her predisposition towards creating an identity in relation to others. The society that she is raised in encourages this behavior from women– especially black women. This can be seen in the text when Jude's ideal relationship is explained because " mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply... And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother" (Morrison 82). This is not to deny that he loves Nel, but he does intrinsically believe that she is not her

own person, but rather a figure in his life meant to complete him. His greatest desire is that “ the two of them together would make one Jude,” (Morrison 83). Nel is a perfect wife for Jude because “ she had no aggression” (Morrison 83) and she rarely disagrees with him, if at all. The relationship that forms between the two of them is not only dysfunctional, it is also very common of the time period. Both men and women reinforce the belief that women are not complete beings on their own, which can be seen when Eva tells Sula, “ ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man” (Morrison 92). Furthermore, In Nel’s argument with Sula at the end of the novel, Nel even tells her, “ You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (Morrison 142). Her comment proves that she does not rely on others because she truly wants to, but because she believes there is no other way for a black woman to act.

Contrarily, Sula rejects the role of a black woman that society imposes onto her. Her attitude towards female sexuality is unconventional, as is her mother Hannah’s. Neither woman gets married, instead entertaining a string of sexual partners over a period of time. In this way, Sula attempts to create her identity like a black man rather than a black woman. She believes that black men are “ the envy of the world,” explaining to Jude, “ everything in the world loves you. White men love you... And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed... Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang onto your cuffs” (Morrison 104). Rather than define her identity through her relations with

others, she does the opposite, as the text says “ 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” (Morrison 95). Paradoxically, in her sexual relations with men, she does use others to help her understand herself, but unlike Nel, she does not rely on them. Sula “ went to bed with men as frequently as she could” because “ it was the only place where she could find what she was looking for” (Morrison 122), but the men that she sleeps with are almost interchangeable to her, as she often looks up at her partner “ in wonder trying to recall his name” (Morrison 123). Additionally, her dismissal of traditional gender roles can be seen when she asks Nel, “ Is that what I’m supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?” (Morrison 143). Similar to her mother Hannah, Sula does not understand the possessive feeling that wives have towards their husbands because she does not define herself through any individual man. Due to the fact that she identified with imagos “ who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care only for their tastes, she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to” (Morrison 119).

Ultimately, it is Sula’s lack of understanding of the concept of possession that destroys her friendship with Nel. Even though Sula “ knew well enough what other women said and felt, or said they felt,” she believes that “ she and Nel had always seen through them” (Morrison 119). She does not realize that “ marriage, apparently, had changed all that” because she “ had no intimate knowledge of marriage” (Morrison 119). Their disagreement at the end of the novel stems from the different ways in which they define concepts like love, friendship, morality, and womanhood. This can be seen when Nel

tells her friend “ You didn’t love me enough to leave him alone... You had to take him away,” to which Sula replies, “ What you mean take him away?” (Morrison 145). Sula does not realize that Nel has possessive feelings towards Jude, and for this reason does not understand why Nel can no longer be with him after he cheats on her. Furthermore, Sula does not believe that her tendency to disregard social norms makes her a worse person than Nel. When Nel tells Sula, “ I was good to you, Sula, why don’t that matter?” (Morrison 144), she is implying that since she follows rules and cares about people in a traditional way, she is a good person. Sula challenges this notion when she asks her, “ How you know... about who was good. How you know it was you?” (Morrison 146). In this scene, Sula is criticizing the way in which Nel shows love for the people in her life by forming her identity in relation to them. In her relationships with her family as well as with her friends, Nel is able to avoid creating her own identity by putting the needs of everyone else above her own. She believes that caring about a person means accommodating his or her every desire, like when she catches Jude with Sula and does not say anything to him because she “ was worried about you not knowing that your fly was open and scared too because your eyes looked like the soldiers’ that time on the train when my mother turned to custard” (Morrison 106). Contrarily, Sula exhibits love for people by giving them what they need instead of what they want. This is exemplified by her speech following the line, “ Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me” (Morrison 145).

Sula’s unconventional lifestyle shapes the identities of the rest of the population of the Bottom because everyone strives to be the antithesis of

her, believing that she is the embodiment of 'wrongness.' This is exemplified by the passage that explains how Sula causes the people of the Bottom "to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (Morrison 117-118). On one hand, similar to Helene on the train, Nel embodies the role of a black woman created by men by allowing Jude to openly disrespect her, justifying her own behavior by describing it as kindness. On the other hand, Sula's unorthodox attitude towards love echoes Eva's, as both relied on the concept of 'tough love.'

Works Cited

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