

# From sula to oscar wao: interpreting sex in literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Love is said to be blind, and sex impervious to reason. However, a person's outlook on sex is incredibly telling of that person's fundamental outlooks upon life itself. To some, it is a sacred act to be committed in marriage only, and to others it is an act of fun, to be committed upon any lighthearted whim of desire. It holds a different meaning for all people. In Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," sex is described as an instrument of power for women, as a tool to be used to empower and lift the self out of repression, imposed by both others and the self. Similarly, in her novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison illustrates sex as a tool that can be used to free women from the societal burden and constraint of stereotypes and expectations.

However, she also depicts this attitude as something that can wound and alienate. In his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Junot Díaz portrays sex as a symptom and symbol of deeply rooted cultural ills. All three writers establish sex as a function of society used to perpetuate stereotypes, a function largely dependent upon women but belonging to men, and they work to encourage women to claim it as their right as well.

In "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde challenges the Western masculinist characterization of the erotic as an element of human debasement, as well as its use as a tool of oppression. She argues that this framing of the erotic has ghettoized women's sensuality, a means by which people know and orient themselves to the world, thereby erasing a significant form of women's liberating power. To confront this erasure, Lorde offers a view of the erotic as a system of understanding which give shape to knowledge of a time, a critical mode through which women may attain excellence. Lorde's position on the erotic has established itself as a political,

social, and academic tool of deconstruction, subversion, and imagination. Although the liberating power of the erotic lies in its point of origin (the self), Lorde suggests that women have been taught to question the self as a source, “to suspect what is deepest in [them]selves,” which “has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information,” (Lorde 53). Oppression is a cyclical process that systematically suppresses various forms of power, and Lorde’s essay is a response to this suppression, particularly in regards to her assertion that the relationship between oppression and power is often marked by corruption and distortion: “In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change” (Lorde 53). An example of such distortion is the way the erotic itself has been misrepresented as pornography, a way of experiencing sensation, acquiring knowledge without feeling.

This distortion of the erotic’s power reinforces docility, obedience, and external definition, all of which contribute to the cycle of oppression through the process of dehumanization. Morality and equality are irrelevant in the face of a man’s libido, and it is this farce of societal understanding that Morrison emphasizes through her portrayal of sex in *Sula*. The titular character operates beneath the understanding of sex as “pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable,” (Morrison 44). However, this is an understanding of sex not widely shared by the women in the community in which *Sula* lives. The entire town is aware that this is an attitude *Sula* inherited from her mother, who in turn inherited it from her mother; “manlove” is the most valued heirloom belonging to the Peace family.

However, this thinking is what causes the community of the Bottom to regard Sula as an instrument of evil, as doing the devil's bidding; she is different, and immune to their judgments that come constantly and without understanding, and thus she is alienated from all others. The tragedy and travesty of this outlook on sex is that it is far from being equally applied. The men of the Bottom are more than enthusiastic participants in the sex that Sula is made an outcast for, and yet they face no reprimands, no punishment. Just as boys will be boys, men will be men -- this is both the definition and the justification for their behavior. This outlook on sex prevents human connection in Sula; much of the community hinges upon it, and yet no one understands it, or even attempts to.

Díaz illustrates sex in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as being representative of deeply problematic gender stereotypes. Masculinity in the novel is measured by the timeless method of notches in the belt; the more women a man sleeps with the more he is considered a man. Men are the main villains in the novel, portrayed mainly through their treatment of women; over and over again, men treat women like objects, use them to satisfy themselves and toss them aside like trash when they are done. Women are inherently involved in sex, but not appreciated. Sex is not theirs to be enjoyed, only to be taken from them, with or without their consent. Communities in the novel love sex, take great pride in it, but it also prevents human connection. Sex in the novel very clearly draws a line, between gender equality among men and women, but also among the single side of men; throughout the novel, Oscar is mocked and ridiculed for being less of a man and less of a Dominican for his lack of sex. In his final letter, Oscar

reveals that he has finally had sex, and of the experience he writes “ So this is what everybody [is] always talking about! Diablo! If only [he had] known. The beauty! The beauty!” (Díaz 353). Díaz spends a majority of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* documenting the forces of evil in this world—despair, loneliness, colonialism, Trujillo—but he ends it all with this passage. He ends it all with a letter that affirms life and beauty and sex, but only with the woman involved being a loving, willing participant enjoying the sex.

Sex is often misunderstood and mis-characterized, both in spite of and because of its prevalence in society. It literally creates life, and it serves as a definition of life for some, but often for the wrong reasons. It is something often taken by men, with or without the permission of women, and in this it becomes a tool used to perpetuate inequality, to oppress women. Lorde, Morrison, and Díaz all take less than common stances on the topic of sex, and proclaim it as something that needs to be claimed and redefined by women, for their empowerment and betterment, and ultimately for the empowerment and betterment of society as a whole.