

Toni morrison: the manifestation of tough love in sula



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The concept of tough love is one that is prevalent in many African-American fictional texts. Toni Morrison's *Sula* is one such example of the way that tough love manifests itself through African-American parent-child relationships. It can often be mistaken for contempt, selfishness, carelessness, or all three of these elements. The discerning factor for tough love, however, is either the acted or unspoken impetus for the child's well being. In the case of Plum and also in the case of Hannah, Eva repeatedly demonstrates this paradoxical act of selflessness. Ultimately, the relationships between Eva and her children, particularly Hannah, provide key examples for the concept of tough love, in all its misunderstood glory, as an element that results from experiencing 'the struggle'. A key element to understanding the concept of tough love is the background from which one emerges; moreover, by emerging from the African-American struggle as Eva depicts. When Hannah approaches Eva and asks her the childish question, "Mamma, did you ever love us?", the reader is startled by the response. This reaction is what gives tough love its edge. The shock value that Hannah, as well as the reader, has to Eva's response is overwhelming. Morrison builds the tension in this scene nicely, beginning with Eva telling the deweys to "Scat!", a command to which they "stumbled and tumbled" out of the room. Eva then replies, but only after making sure she understands the question correctly as many black mothers will, "No, I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'." (67). By Eva beginning her explanation in such a way demonstrates her surprise and seeming contempt for Hannah even asking her such a question. The manner in which Eva continues her reply implies that she feels that this question is 'a slap in the face' and her putrid words and short nature when replying are symbolic of her intention to 'slap

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Hannah right back'. After giving Hannah a hard time about how evil and ill-intended that question is, Eva gives her a history lesson about how difficult and unforgiving life was in 1895 saying, "...1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies. Stepping tall, ain't you?" (68). This last question Eva asks intends to let Hannah know how out of place she is in even bringing up the question of love. Eva then continues, posing the rhetorical statement "...Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie?...No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off...." (69). This long-winded reply shows how empathetic Eva is and has been to her children even when they have been apathetic to her, thus implying that her children have no real concept of what it means to struggle. After hearing her mother's obvious disgust, Hannah decides to specify her question to include the death of Plum at the hands of their mother, asking, " But what about Plum? What'd you kill Plum for, Mamma?" (70). The suspense of this scene builds in the clever way that Morrison narrates and takes the focus off of Eva and Hannah and places it onto what is happening around them, signifying Eva's thought process of her not wanting to be in this conversation any longer. After a long while, Eva replies, " He give me such a time. Such a time. Look like he didn't even want to be born. But he come on out. Boys is hard to bear...." (71). She then continues about how after Plum became an addict, he returned to his infantile state, wanting to " crawl back into [her] womb". Eva justifies her actions by saying, " I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again...." (71). These final words are indicative of one form of tough love because here Eva explains her

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reasoning for sacrificing the physical life of her child so that he may be at peace. In this sense, Eva killed Plum to save his soul and to keep him from continuing his self-destruction. A part of her may have been selfish by not wanting to deal with Plum's addiction, but she made the ultimate sacrifice in killing her own child. The romanticized way in which Morrison depicted Plum's death was also symbolic of the theme of tough love. Eva holding Plum before she sets fire to his body signifies her struggle between a life of suffering for Plum or a death that would lead to peace. In choosing the latter, Eva demonstrates an extreme case in which tough love is key. After having this long conversation with Hannah, tough love surfaces yet again in the same chapter as Eva leaps from a second story window in an attempt to save her daughter's life, one leg and all. This action clearly dismisses any harsh feelings of contempt that may have been rising in their earlier conversation. Eva sacrifices her livelihood for her child yet again through this selfless act of love. It goes to show that no matter how she dealt with Hannah before in a time of tension and anger, when it really comes down to it, she will do anything for her children. Morrison pays particular attention to add "The blood from [Eva's] face cuts filled her eyes so she could not see, could only smell the familiar odor of cooked flesh," (77), reminding Eva and also the reader of her plight with Plum. The ironic occurrence of both children dying by being burned shows Eva's ability to love her children while gracefully accepting that she must let each one go. Throughout *Sula*, tough love is characterized by an action that is either tough, like Eva sacrificing her son, or loving in nature, like Eva trying to save Hannah's life by jumping out of a window onto her burning body. Although contempt, selfishness or carelessness may be factors, they are not the driving forces behind the

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actions or words of toughness. They are only the means by which love can be shown in times of tribulation. In any case, tough love emerges through 'the struggle' that Eva has endured being an African-American mother.