

Sula by toni morrison critical essay

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Discuss how many characters describe Sula's birthmark which looks different to several people in *The Bottom*. Does the birthmark reflect their fears or dreams? How so? Lots of people see Sula in different lights.

Their relationship with her determines what they may see above her brow. Most of her relatives and her best friend Nel see a rose. Shadrack, the town crazy, sees a tadpole. Jude first sees a copperhead snake. How her birthmark 'shifts' depends on the mood and notions of the person viewing it. It has nothing at all to do with the content of Sula's character, which so many folks believe to be evil. Sula's birthmark is mostly seen as a long-stemmed rose.

The rose is commonly a symbol for love and is revered for its beauty but it stands as a symbol with many meanings. First, it is an early, sacred symbol, an ancient flower that may have derived thousands and thousands of years ago and carried about because of its beauty. It has been adopted by the Catholic Church as the flower of the Virgin Mary. In ancient days, if a rose hung from the ceiling in a meeting room, the information discussed in the meeting was to be kept secret. In Rome, the rose was a symbol of Venus, the goddess of love and sexuality. The rose can be sensual. But in this case, the rose above Sula's eye is a symbol of her purity and strength in her self, her unwavering character, which can be seen as beautiful.

The rose breaks away from the otherwise plainness of Sula's face. This idea can be seen as contradictory because the citizens of *The Bottom* see Sula as evil. They don't believe that she herself is malevolently evil, but that she is an evil creation of God, meant to give the people of *The Bottom* more meaning and pride in their lives. " 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" (117-118). When she returned after her ten years of disappearance, many negative signs popped up. Flocks and flocks of robins flew around The Bottom and shit all over the town.

Mr. Finley choked on a chicken bone and died as Sula passed by. What scared the folks of Medallion the most though, was the fact that Shadrack tipped his imaginary hat to Sula, something he would never do to anyone else. He was the town crazy. He cussed about and talked to himself and had no visitors. Everyone thought him strange and paid him no mind. Until he tipped his hat at Sula.

With Teapot's Mama cleaning up her act and Mr. Finley choking, the people then saw Sula's rose as something completely opposite of what they had previously thought. "[These events] cleared up for everybody the meaning of the birthmark over her eye; it was not a stemmed rose, or a snake, it was Hannah's ashes marking her from the very beginning." (114) Watching her mama burn, dance inside the flames, without doing anything but standing and watching was another reason why the people thought Sula was evil, hence the ashes marking her. Jude Greene saw a copperhead snake when he looked at Sula. When she returned from her travels, there she sat in his kitchen one day, sassing off about how he has it made as a black man. "Jude's temper flared just a bit as he looked at this fried of his wife's, this slight woman, not exactly plain, but not fine either, with a copperhead over

her eye..." (103) The reason why he sees a snake is because of what he says right before that...she's not plain but not fine, which means that Jude is having some tempting thoughts about this woman.

The poisonous snake represents the carnal sin that Jude is about to commit like the snake in the Garden of Eden; it represents his guilt as a married man committing adultery. He may also see Sula as a temptress, a surefire poison that causes the death of his marriage to Nel. On the next page, Jude changes his tune a bit. " But thinking that Sula had an odd way of looking at things and that her wide smile took some of the sting from that rattlesnake over her eye. A funny woman, he thought, not bad-looking. But he could see why she wasn't married; she stirred a man's mind maybe, but not his body. (104) This thought process shows Jude coming around to the idea that Sula may not be so bad, after all.

She shows intellect and that can be appealing, making her seem more tempting as a whole, regardless of her body. Although...thinking this and deciding Sula might be attractive means he's tempted by her fruit and aroused by her somehow. Nel still sees a rose when she comes to visit a sick Sula, years after their friendship pushed pause. " For the first time in three years she would be looking at the stemmed rose that hung over the eye of her enemy...She would be facing the black rose that Jude had kissed..." (138). Nel's perception of Sula's birthmark has not changed. She doesn't see a snake or any other deviant creature. She still thinks of it as a beautiful, pure rose which suggests that Nel still feels there's a kinship between them.

Why else would she bother to visit Sula and see if she needs anything? They were once each other's other half. Once Sula left, her sudden departure seemed to change the dynamic of their friendship pretty drastically. She left Nel with no notice, slept with her husband and broke her family, but Nel still saw a rose, a pure, unwavering flower. Lastly, poor old Shadrack sees Sula's birthmark as a tadpole. After hearing of her death, he remembers her as a child, his only visitor and friend: " She had a tadpole over her eye (that was how he knew she was a friend-she had the mark of the fish he loved), and one of her braids had come undone. " (156-57) Like his thought says, he knew the girl was okay because she was marked with a fish, and he loved fish. The other people in town thought that Shadrack's strange hat-tip was because they were both devils.

The truth that they didn't know was that Sula was Shadrack's only visitor to his home. When she was just a girl, she snuck in his house, just to see how he lived, and he caught her. He was excited and she scared. He never forgot her. Shadrack's tadpole is also a symbol of metamorphosis. A tadpole only starts out as a tadpole, but it grows into a much larger fish. All through the story, we see psychological changes in Shadrack and his behavior.

After the war and his hospital stay, he was only slightly demented. At the end of the novel, when Shadrack is but an old, weary man, he is seen as a crazy and disregarded, hence the reason why he has no friends or visitors in The Bottom. In a way, these symbols do represent a little of themselves and some of their personalities. It gives us insight to what the characters may think of their relationship with Sula. After all that time, Nel still considers

Sula's birthmark to be nothing but a rose, in all its beauty. That is the biggest statement, and quite possibly the theme of the book. After all those years and all that turmoil, Nel still considers Sula a friend even though she doesn't admit it until she visits the gravesite.

Nel will always feel guilty of their broken relationship and it will haunt her til the day she dies. Sula may haunt her til the day she dies. Her death never really did mark anything for the people of The Bottom after all.