

Character of nel in toni morrison's novel sula

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The Gray Ball

In Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, the character Nel discovers her husband Jude having an adulterous affair with her closest friend, Sula. After Nel sees Jude and Sula, her husband leaves her and she leaves her friend. After the betrayal of Jude and Sula, Nel begins to see a "quiet, gray, dirty...ball of muddy string" (109) that hovered over her until it "broke and scattered" (174) at the end of the novel. This gray ball symbolizes Nel's self conflict of feeling worthless after her husband leaves her.

The gray ball appears after Jude's adulterous affair with Sula because Nel believes that she had lost her self worth with the lost of her husband. She saw herself not as an individual, but as a part of Jude, Jude's wife. Even after Jude leaves her, she "behaved as the wronged wife" (120). Her identity was still being defined by her husband; she was still "Jude's wife" and not just independently "Nel". This attachment is mirrored by the objects that the muddy ball is made of: "fur and string and hair" (109). These objects were all once attached and part of something, but now detached, casted aside, and useless. Because of Jude's abandonment, Nel sees herself as useless, saying "what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now...what good are they" (111). The gray ball is also "without weight", which is symbolic of how Nel's problem is not physically existent. Nel's belief that she had lost her worth is only something that she had in her mind and something she set upon herself. At the end, the compact muddy ball frees itself "like dandelion spores in the breeze" (174), representing how Nel becomes free due to her

realization that she was not part of Jude and that she is not a detached part of Jude that was “ missing Jude” (174).

Nel sees the gray ball constantly hovering over her because she is unable to confront her self conflict of feeling worthless. The gray ball “ just floated there for the seeing, if she want to, and...for the touching if she wanted to” (110). Instead of touching the ball and confronting her self conflict of feeling worthless, she avoids the ball, avoiding her self conflict. She says she “ didn't want to see it” because if she saw it, she “ might actually touch it” (110). While Nel avoids the gray ball, she also says, “ the terrible part [is] the effort it took not to look” (109). To not see the gray ball would be for Nel to acknowledge that her feeling of worthlessness did not exist and accept that she is not a part of Jude. Instead, she did not believe that, so she sees the gray ball, symbolic of her feeling of worthlessness from being detached from her husband. It took her effort to avoid it because she does not want to feel worthless, as shown by the grief that she feels that she believes is coming from her loss of Jude because she had still wanted to be a part of Jude. It was only when Nel confronts her self conflict of feeling worthless, that the gray ball “ broke and scattered” (174) and disappears. It was at that time that she realizes that she is not a part of Jude and accepts the fact that she did not lose her self worth when she lost her husband.

The character, Nel, in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, begins seeing a gray ball after she discovers her husband's adultery with her close friend, Sula. This gray ball symbolizes her self conflict of feeling worthless because of her husband leaving her. She constantly sees this gray ball because she is

unable to confront her self conflict. The gray ball disappears when she finally confronts it, accepting that she was not a part of her husband and that she did not lose her worth when her husband left her.