

The multidimensional birthmark: a study of sula's character



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As intricate entities, humans are like prisms: we have several layers that make up our inherent nature. During various interactions and instances, we react differently and thus allow novel parts of us to become apparent. Sula, in Toni Morrison's novel of the same name, is a character of complexity, whose diverse qualities materialize when she faces new situations. Her manifold attributes manifest as the birthmark above her eye. Sula's inherently complex nature causes people in her life to perceive the mark differently. From snake, to rose, to tadpole, these varying perceptions all mirror symbols created in their imagination, yet all represent real attributes of Sula's disposition. To render as a progressive, complex, and individual person, Sula embraces the impurity of her birthmark and allows all of its symbolism to envelope her in her inherent characteristics: rose sensuality, snake cunning, and tadpole transformation.

Living in a community where African- American females had very set roles, Sula allowed herself to ignore societal norms and embrace the sensuality of the rose. As a sexually free woman, Sula provided a center for herself through sexual intercourse. Unlike other women, she embraced sensuality and passion. She had sex for her own personal benefit, not for the pleasure of her male counterparts. " She waited patiently for him to turn away... leaving her in a postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (123). In this way, she set herself apart from the other women; Sula never become attached to anything besides her own feelings. Sula also sensualized her friend Nel showing her that freedom of spirit and body were powerful attributes that a woman could conjure. When Sula cut off her finger, Nel saw female

determination. The Peace household enamored Nel showing her a world forged, led, and fostered by women. Sula's sensual tendencies even sensualized herself. Unlike Nel, she never dreamed of love or comfort, but instead fantasied about " a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses in full view of someone who shared both the taste and the speed" (52). By not being afraid of how others viewed her sensuality, Sula embodied the rose, and allowed her complexity to set the precedent for individuality and boldness to flourish.

Like all intricate people, Sula balanced her positive attributes with evil characteristics. She developed the evil snake above her eye by participating in malevolent acts, as she slept with men for personal gain, even when they were still married men. This caused controversy within the town. " And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible—for she would lay their husbands once and then no more" (115). The people of the Bottom also believed that Sula pushed down children, came to church without underwear, and belittled their hard cooked food. However, many of these perceived baleful deeds were fallacies and subsequently produced positive outcomes, as they caused the town to change for the better. " 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).

Therefore, precisely like the cunning snake, Sula's malicious acts also served a positive purpose, as they connected the people of the Bottom to themselves, their families, and each other. Transformation equates to growth and development, a period when individuals discover their unique qualities.

People progress by gaining experience, learning new things, and understanding themselves and those around them.

The tadpole, a symbol of transformation, also reflected Sula's character. Sula was unique in *The Bottom*, because she focused on her own development, not on how other people perceived her. "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). She was independent which allowed her to burgeon and unravel personal strength. With her confidence, she created a sense of self-reliance. She was only dependent on her own feelings, not the opinions of others; as she grew no one, man, or woman, could own her beside herself. "Whatever's burning in me is mine!" (93). This expression of self-respect and worth even translated physically. Like the tadpole, Sula was the epitome of youth. A husband or children never tied her down, and she never seemed to age. "She was near thirty, and unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or the pocket at the back of her neck" (115). Sula was unlike any woman in *The Bottom*. Mentally she progressed, and always allowed herself to see things differently, as she grew in different directions. Physically she remained youthful and radiant. The symbolism of Sula's tadpole birthmark proves that she was an independent, self-reliant, progressive woman.

Sula was a complex woman that embodied the symbols of the rose, snake, and tadpole. She empowered people to see both herself and themselves sensually. The rose took shape on her face as her allure drew people to new realizations of what a woman could be. Sula proved to be as cunning as a snake by disguising her evil deeds as helpful ones. The people of *The Bottom* believed her to be devious and baleful, but in reality, everything she did was

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beneficial. Transformation became second nature. She allowed herself to flourish and grow organically, never letting anyone dictate who she should be. Therefore, like the youthful, transformative tadpole, Sula maintained a young visage whilst developing into a progressive woman. The various representations of Sula's birthmark epitomize who she is as a woman, sensual, cunning, and transformative.