

Evil and conformity in toni morrison's sula



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This novel is entitled *Sula*, after the woman who takes the conventions of her small home town and turns them completely upside down, but the story itself would not be complete without her friend and counterpart who embodies these conventions, Nel. Although overall this is not a very realistic novel, Morrison builds these two characters realistically out of their two very different upbringings. One girl has her imagination stifled and is always surrounded by order and cleanliness, with a mother who is a moral pillar of the community, while the second little girl comes of age in a household that is in constant disarray, with no male role models and a mother who is openly promiscuous. In spite of their very different origins, the two girls find each other and build a strong bond of friendship. By presenting the reader with these two friends who eventually choose opposing paths in their adult lives, Morrison conveys her criticism of people who blindly succumb to societal conventions, revealing it as a shortcoming that can be detrimental to a person's humanity. The "evil" actions of Sula provide a dialectic to the rest of the people in the Bottom who seem to thrive on conformity. What exactly is evil and why is it dangerous to live a life of conformity like Nel? These are the questions that I tend to explore in this paper. First of all though, it is necessary to understand where these two women come from by investigating the important events of their childhood. Helene Wright is taught by her grandmother to be ashamed of her prostitute mother while being raised with religion, "under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary,"(17) and she transfers this strict upbringing onto her own daughter Nel, after she moves as far away from her New Orleans home as possible, to the Bottom. Since Helene wanted a polite, obedient daughter, she quells her imagination making the girl vulnerable to the grip of convention, "Any

enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by her mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground."(18) In order to oppose or even think of opposing convention, an individual must have imagination, which will give her the ability to think for herself. Abiding by convention requires no imagination, one simply mindlessly joins the crowd. Nel also becomes adversely affected by the incident on the train, which is a pivotal moment in her life. It is not the increasing racism and presence of segregation on the southbound trip that profoundly affects Nel so much as the look that she sees in the black soldiers' faces when her mother smiles at the racist white conductor." It was on that train, shuffling towards Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard-always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly."(22)At this point, Nel makes the conscious decision to avoid the look of disapproval at all costs, which comes to mean, later in her life, that she must follow the rules of society or suffer this same disgrace all over again. Helene had already instilled in the young girl a tendency to conform by constricting her imagination, and after this incident, Nel herself resolves to avoid confrontation, completing the education that renders her unable to resist convention. A look into the friend Nel acquires after this trip reveals a completely different situation. The Peace household was a place, "...where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink..."(29); a far cry from the order and discipline of the Wright household. Even the physical structure of the house itself is confusing, with inaccessible rooms and doors continually being added on by Eva, who is the master and demigod of the family, and this confusion and disorder translates

directly into the family's relationships. Sula's two main role models, who were her mother Hannah and Eva, never had a steady relationship with any male outside of their respective husbands who were not around for long. Instead, there was a constant flow of strange men in the house consisting of Hannah's daily lovers and Eva's gentlemen callers. Aside from Boyboy, the one man she hates, Eva loves men in general, "It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters...The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake."(41) When Sula is older, she inevitably falls right in line with this behavior. While Nel's mother never teaches her about sex, Hannah "rippled with sex,"(42) and Sula drew her own conclusions about it directly from her mother's behavior, "Seeing (Hannah) step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable...So she watched her mother's face and the face of the men when they opened the pantry door and made up her own mind."(44)Sex for Sula has nothing to do with love or even friendship; it is no more than an act that two people of the opposite sex engage in in order to make each other happy. What could be simpler while still being contrary to every moral standard of society than that? The girl's behavior as an adult is a reflection of these supposedly immoral lessons that she learned from her mother as a child. Nel and Sula as individuals were both lacking in a certain respect: Nel was unable to "think outside the box" without Sula, while Sula herself was unable to make reasonable decisions not completely governed by her emotions without Nel. The two halves make a whole. Morrison states that, "...they had already made each other's acquaintance in the delirium of their noon dreams" (51) One girl is so much a part the other that they knew

each other before they physically met. Together, the two friends embarked on the road to womanhood attempting always to find a place in white America," Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they set about creating something else to be...Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers...they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for."(52)So these two little girls, raised in completely different worlds, manage to find in each other a compliment to their own personalities and a closeness that they were unable to salvage from their differently inadequate parents^{2E} It is within this relationship that they have their first encounter with the idea of evil-the Chicken Little incident. While it is Sula who actually lets go of Chicken Little's hand, Nel is the one who taunts him to start with, drawing him into the interaction that results in his death. The two inadvertently work together in the boy's demise, and the first thing Nel says after he disappears beneath the calm water, when one would expect her to shout out in grief or even disbelief is, " Somebody saw."(61) Later, at the funeral, Nel's sense of guilt becomes even more apparent, " Although she knew she had ' done nothing,' she felt convicted and hanged right there in the pew."(65) She is not concerned about the loss of Chicken Little, only the idea that she is guilty of an evil act bothers her. On the contrary, " Sula simply cried,"(65) which exemplifies her remorse over the death of the little boy. Ironically, it is the girl who will later be considered evil by her community who mourns the loss of life and her " moral" friend who is only concerned about herself. This blurring of the line between good and evil only becomes evident to Nel forty-three years later when Eva brings the subject up and confuses her with Sula. After Nel protests to Eva that it was

<https://assignbuster.com/evil-and-conformity-in-toni-morrison-s-sula/>

Sula and not she who had killed the boy, Eva replies, " You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched didn't you?"(168) and even goes so far as to say, " Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you."(169) After this encounter, Nel consciously recalls " The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped."(170) This realization makes Nel aware of the fact that she really is no different from Sula in that they are both human, and therefore imperfect. Part of this basic human imperfection is the fact that we all have a dark side whether or not we would like to admit it. Nel watched Chicken Little become a part of the river with the same sick fascination that turns heads at the scene of an accident or that causes people to secretly hope for a car crash during a race. In order to understand this secretive side of ourselves, we must first be able to acknowledge its presence, which the people of the Bottom, including Nel prior to her confrontation with Eva, are incapable of. Since they cannot understand the side of themselves that the woman Sula comes to represent, the people of the Bottom shun her and label her as being evil. Even though the black community of the Bottom, as Morrison continually emphasizes, does recognize the fact that evil is an inevitable part of life, they are too quick to label anyone who deviates from their accepted conventions as being evil. They know that, "(God) was not the God of three faces that they sang about. They knew quite well that He had a fourth and that the fourth explained Sula,"(118) but the shortcoming in this logic is the fact that the people do not apply it to themselves and consequently fail to recognize the evils inherent in their conformity. Sula is simply acting out the life that the rest of the community desires in their secret subconscious, " she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no

<https://assignbuster.com/evil-and-conformity-in-toni-morrison-s-sula/>

obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her.”(118) This type of life may appear to be entirely selfish, and indeed it is, but it is also very honest. If Nel and her cohorts were to take a true, honest look at their own hopes and desires, then they would realize that selfishness does not necessarily mean a complete rejection of others. In loving someone a person loves the fact that that other person brings out the best in her, which is essentially a selfish, but not evil end. Unfortunately, the conventions of society place very negative connotations on the this word, which renders a person like Sula, who is openly selfish, an object of dissension and evil. She becomes a pariah because she admits what no one else will; that first and foremost a person must live her life for herself, and in turn this honesty will leave her open and more capable of sharing her love of self with others. Nel and Sula’s childhood friendship is an example of selfish love that was beneficial to both parties. During this time, the two girls were able to bear witness to the false sense of morality that consumed the adults around them. While Sula still carried this sentiment with her into her adult life, it is the fact that Nel no longer felt this way due to her complete assimilation into society that comes between the two friends.”(Sula) knew well enough what other women felt, or said they felt. But she and Nel had always seen through them. They both knew that those women were not jealous of other women; that they were only afraid of losing their jobs2E Afraid their husbands would discover that no uniqueness lay between their legs.”(119)Sula is not a malicious person and would never willingly hurt Nel, who is the one person she ever truly loved, “ She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude.”(119)Nel, however, has embraced the conventions of her society so fully that she feels as though she has

experienced the ultimate act of betrayal when she catches Sula and Jude in the act. She has become one of the women that the two little girlfriends used to criticize, only upset because she "...knew how to behave as the wronged wife."(120) Since her marriage, Nel had allowed conventions and rules to dictate her existence because she was afraid of the " free fall...that demanded invention."(120) By allowing convention to control her action, Nel is in denial of her own humanity because she decides nothing on her own. All of her ideals are formed out of the ideals of society, which robs her of her sense of self, diminishing the quality of her life. Any idea that negates life in this way is evil in and of itself. Even three years later when Nel sees Sula for the first time since their falling out, she is still obsessed with the idea that Sula robbed her of something, but Sula corrects her in saying that Jude wasn't taken, he left. If Nel's beloved husband had cared about their relationship, then he would not have had sex with Sula; therefore, the fact that he did indicates that he had already left the relationship, which was originally founded on mere affection in the first place and not true love. The blindness that results from Nel's conformity makes her oblivious to the fact that she has lost the best friend and loved one she ever had simply because society tells her that Sula is evil. She was doing,"...what every colored woman in this country is doing." What's that?" Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world.'"(143)Nel has not truly lived because she has not been living for herself. She is incomplete-a " stump" that is incapable of forgiving her friend before she dies, but Sula's last words come back to haunt her in the end of the novel, " How you know?...About who was good. How you know it was you?...maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was

me.”(146)How does anyone know whom or what is good and evil? This is a question that will never have any definite answer, and it is works such as this novel that help people realize this important fact. Societies like the one in the Bottom believe that there is a concrete answer to this question and that it simply involves whether or not an individual adheres to the accepted moral standards of that society, but this is a dangerous assumption. To accept conventions such as marriage exactly the way society dictates, as Nel does, is a denial of the self, because individuals must always question what they are told. Without people like Sula, we easily forget that our lives are molded around an accepted standard that is not necessarily just, right or good, it is simply accepted. Nel gave up her one true comrade in order to remain an integral part of her society, essentially giving up everything for nothing. Life means nothing without love and friendship, and true friendship is a bond that should transcend societal boundaries. Nel and Sula knew and understood this concept when they were young, and Sula retained this ideal until the end, whereas Nel lost track of her priorities when she gave herself up to conformity. The greatest evil revealed by this novel is the evil inherent in denying one's self in order to place the comfort and ease of convention above one's true nature and desire. By labeling Sula as evil, the Bottom unwittingly revealed the evils of its societal infrastructure-the evils of mindless conformity that deny true humanity. Morrison's ending saves itself from being completely tragic when Nel finally realizes the importance of her friendship with Sula over her position as a wronged wife. ““ All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude...We was girls together...O Lord, Sula,’ she cried, ‘ girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.’”(174) Given the circumstances, this is

a happy ending, because Nel has finally realized the error of her ways and is able to truly mourn her lost companion.