

The societal impact of nonconformity in sula



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Toni Morrison's *Sula* celebrates liberation from society's constraints on individuality and self-discovery, and illustrates the negative impact of conformity. The novel follows the lives of several members of The Bottom's community who refuse to relinquish their identities to fit the expectations of how a certain race or gender should act and the impact it has on their lives and their society. This society, influenced by the 1900's racial segregation in America, enforces specific standards, and ostracizes whoever defies the cultural norm. Although certain characters choose to retain individuality and isolate themselves, they never fully establish their identities and desperately search for something in order to do so. The characters cling to certain aspects of their lives to create a sense of self, only to lose both it and themselves, henceforth forced to live aimlessly. Lynn Nordin's essay "' My Lonely Is Mine' Loss and Identity in Toni Morrison's *Sula*" discusses both the negative and positive impact of loss on characters' identities in the novel. Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* reflects a similar notion, as the title character's pointlessly stumble through the play trying to discover their purpose, but ultimately lose themselves. The ambiguous identities of the novel's characters highlight the ambivalent impact nonconformity has on an individual and society itself.

Morrison begins her novel detailing the origin of The Bottom, a hilltop community of African Americans, as one of deceit and white ascendancy. Although they dislike the blatant injustice, the members of The Bottom make no effort to change their circumstances and instead emulate such segregation within their own community, " They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things—and each other, wondering...what that little girl Sula...

was all about, and what Aris 2 they themselves were all about” (Morrison 6). Definite expectations and social norms restrain the residents’ individuality, and the embracement of identity and refusal to conform to the morals and mundane lifestyle of the town result in ostracization, isolation, and fear. Initially, defiance of their principles frightens the residents and they hide from it, but eventually grow accustomed to and incorporate such things into their regimen, “...they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives” (Morrison 15), and ultimately become dependent on them. Just as “ Suicide Day became a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio” (Morrison 16), Sula, a promiscuous and nonconforming individual, forces the town to develop a strong identity, which dissipates upon her death.

Throughout her entire life, Sula challenges her society and aims to develop her own identity instead of conforming to orthodox rules, infuriating her town. Her obdurate rejection of the 1900s’ misogyny, racism, and classism intrigues all those around her, sparking an obtuse hatred and fear among her neighbors. However, amidst the antipathy, love and camaraderie infuse itself into the town’s identity, “ They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together” (Morrison 117). Sula’s presence, although despised, becomes a crucial part of The Bottom, and once removed, the town members lose purpose and understanding. Although after Sula’s death a brief tranquility permeates the town, without someone to mutually hate and bond over, literally all color and warmth disappears, and the town reverts to its cruelty and stifling behaviors. Without an identity, or some form of motivation to live, the residents of The

Bottom desperately search for one, eventually finding Aris 3 solace in the incongruity of Shadrack and Suicide Day, which ironically leads to their deaths. While the majority of The Bottom's members finds an identity through hatred of nonconformity, several characters find temporary identities in many facets, and choose whether to embrace or reject certain these aspects of themselves.

Race plays a significant role in the identities of many characters, as they either defy or accept society's perception of black inferiority. Shadrack's finding comfort and stability when he first sees his face displays the importance of embracing what society deems unfit and detestable. " He had been harboring a skittish apprehension...that he did not exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more" (Morrison 13). Shadrack feels none of the inferiority that segregation impresses, and instead basks in the beauty and richness of his race. Similarly, Sula expresses a stout confidence in the superiority of blacks to Jude and Nel, claiming all men, even whites, adore and envy blacks and their love (Morrison 105). Tar Baby, one of the few whites who interact with the black community, finds relief in The Bottom, where he can live and die peacefully without the expectations of white society.

However, despite the positive perceptions of blacks, several characters try to eliminate all ties to their culture and inadvertently accept the oppressed role assigned by society. Helene Wright's compulsive cleaning symbolizes her desire to rid herself of her black and Creole roots and suppresses her daughter's identity as well, " I don't talk Creole...and neither do you" (Morrison 27). Her desire for approval and propriety make her passive when

confronted by someone she has accepted as a superior, “ An eagerness to please and an apology for living met in her voice” (Morrison 20). Although her daughter, Nel, refuses to become like her mother, “ I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me” (Morrison 28), she ultimately imitates her life as a single mother and leader of the black community. Conformity to racial standards causes great pain for all who do so, while those who accept their race and origins have a greater sense of self, and allows them to escape from more societal norms and prejudices.

Racial norms directly link to the gender roles assigned to men and women in the black society, however, much ambiguity exists as to the acceptance of sex nonconformity in *The Bottom*. The town celebrates female leaders such as Eva Peace, Helene Wright, and Nel Wright, other women despise immoral, promiscuous women like Sula Peace and Hannah Peace. Moreover, men who do not work and isolate themselves are shamed, while those who engage in adultery experience no reprimand. Morrison creates a world of female empowerment, where men do not dictate the lives of women, instead, women dominate society and men have a passive role. Shadrack, Plum, and Tar-Baby isolate themselves and make no effort for production, forcing the women around them to act as both caretakers and leaders. All husbands or partners exist predominantly as motivators for the female characters’ action. The departure of Boy-Boy, causes Eva to become a prominent figure in society, and cares for her family and others, driven by her hatred for her ex-husband, which ultimately defines her identity, “...the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities” (Morrison 36). Nel experiences a

similar event, where she becomes the sole source of income and support for her children, and uses the pain as motivation and, like Eva and her mother, becomes a leader in the black community. As Nel emulates her mother's life, Sula imitates Hannah's. Hannah shamelessly flirts and beds men, regardless of marital status, attracting them with her attractiveness and magnetic personality, " Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was" Aris 5 (Morrison 43). Men enjoy her company because, despite breaking the stereotypical modest, moral wife role, she acts elegant and feminine.

Although her daughter follows her model of promiscuity, Sula's methodology is more masculine, as sex exists solely as a personal pleasure rather than an emotional experience. She lacks Hannah's kindness and generosity and infuriates both men and women, " Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting women...Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow" (Morrison 115).

Gender plays a prominent role in the development of the character's identities, as the passivity of the men in the novel allow the creation of strong, powerful women who defy traditional gender roles and greatly impact their society. As Sula mimicked her mother's lifestyle, Morrison emphasizes the severe impact friends and family have on one's identity and individuality. The Deweys, three boys who came from different backgrounds and all dubbed Dewey by Eva, grow so close that eventually they become a single entity, where one cannot exist without the others. Despite vastly different physical features, no one can tell the difference between any of the boys with which Eva has no problem, " What you need to tell them apart for?

They's all deweys" (Morrison 38). Despite aging, the boys never mature and remain childish and inseparable until their deaths. The boys do not conform to the expectations of the town and instead find their identity with each other.

Helene Wright also establishes her identity through her daughter. Not wishing her daughter to also live of life of disorder and pointless ambitions, Helene inhibits imagination and tries to deter any bad influences on her daughter. Helene wishes to impart a piece of herself onto her daughter, and appears to succeed in instilling her daughter with propriety and the desire for control and order. Helene wishes to conform her daughter to the ways of society and wishes to nearly impart her Aris 6 beliefs onto her daughter.

While Nel does not experience an identity assimilation with her mother, she firmly roots her identity with Sula as a child, and later her husband when Sula departs. However, once she loses him, she believes herself to be gone as well, and she aches for the loss of control and stability in her life. She feels incomplete, and despite her cool and perfect demeanor, the ominous "ball of muddy strings" (Morrison 109) symbolizes her inner turmoil and chaotic nature—similar to Sula. Until she visits Eva, Nel does not realize that her husband's betrayal is not the one causing her sadness despite using him to fill her incompleteness for years. When Eva confronts Nel about the accidental murder and claims she watched, Nel realizes she enjoyed it since she truly craves chaos and lack of control—exactly like Sula. Nel realizes that Sula is her counterpart, and they exist as a single person. However, Sula's death has forever separated the pair, and Nel finally releases the gray ball as she weeps for her lost friendship. Sula recognizes much earlier that she feels

incomplete, “ her craving for the half of her equation” (Morrison 121), and tries to fill it with sex—which she observed as a child as a pleasurable experience that temporarily replaced loneliness and replaced emotional relationships.

Both women struggle throughout the novel to find their identity, but are unable to do so without each other. While Sula embraces difference, and refuses to conform to society’s standards and expectations of a colored woman, “ Why? Why can’t I do it all, why can’t I have it all” (Morrison 142), Nel inversely tries to establish an identity through conforming to expectations, “ You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like” (Morrison 121). Both have tremendous effects on their society, as both instill a strong community connection in different ways. As Nel and Sula exist as a single entity, searching for their identity, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* contains a similar concept with its two title characters. The characters, while possessing unique character traits, essentially fulfill the others need and together satisfy a whole person. They spend the play searching for meaning and their identities as the characters themselves even confuse their names and by the end lose all sense of individuality, “ Ros: We are Guildenstern and Rosencrantz. Guil: Which is which” (Stoppard 121). Just as Nel and Sula can never fully establish their identity together due to separation by transcontinental distance, anger, and death, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* never discover themselves and their purpose in life.

Likewise, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* imitate the people around them and fill certain roles like many characters in *Sula* do as to fit into society. In both

works, the characters try different activities in hopes to fulfill a sense of purpose yet fail to do so. Stoppard's play's discussion of identity and the characters' completion of one another compares greatly to Morrison's bilateral protagonist—Sula and Nel. Sula and Nel's search for identity through either choosing to join or refute society parallels the desire for peace insinuated by the title character's name, which translates to peace. The search for identity throughout the novel by all the characters portrays the desire of a society to achieve peace and a purpose. Many of the character's experience hardship and lack control whether or not they participate in the society around them.

Although Nel and Sula choose two different approaches to achieve the inner peace they desire, neither find the identity and meaning they desire when apart. As girls they comforted and protected one another, and despite suffering through familial issues, had the peace they try to restore as adults. When Sula returns, that tranquility is restored for a brief moment, until Sula, believing the bond where the pair shared Aris 8 everything including romantic partners still exists, inadvertently betrays Nel. As Sula lays dying, she momentarily believes the childhood peace they had achieved still exists as she wishes to tell her friend and counterpart about death, " Well, I'll be damned...it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." Meanwhile, at the end of the novel Nel cries for both her friend and the realization that she will never achieve peace without Sula. The loss of their friendship greatly impacts the characters and their lives. Once separated after years of friendship, Sula and Nel must explore who they are separate of each other. When Sula leaves, she freely explores the world. According to Lynn Nordin's essay "' My Lonely

Is Mine' Loss and Identity in Toni Morrison's Sula", " Sula's loss of Nel appears to be a catalyst for her to live her experimental life outside of the confines of the Bottom" (Nordin 13). Once separated from a distinctive part of her personality, Sula tries to redefine herself. However, the world outside of The Bottom leaves her unsatisfied, and strangely she returns to a place she appears to dislike. " Returning to the community seems to go against the development that Sula is seeking, since she returns to a place where she is already marginalized" (Nordin 13). Nordin believes Sula's returns to Medallion solely because of innate, subconscious knowledge that Nel completes her personality and satisfies her search for identity (Nordin 14). Sula's intent on restoring her lost personality and drive fails when she naively believes Nel has not conformed and changed to fit The Bottom's society—something Sula will never do. In grief, Sula isolates herself, and grieves the loss of her friendship and identity while trying to find something or someone else to replace her friend.

Morrison's novel illustrates the importance of identity and the need to establish one to achieve inner peace. None of her character's ever truly achieve this, and suffer greatly for it. Her Aris 9 protagonists, Nel and Sula, represent two sides of the same character, one who chooses to follow society's rules and conform, and another who isolates herself and refuses to join a society in an effort to restore a lost identity, both in an effort to reestablish a lost identity which can only be restored by rekindling their friendship. Unfortunately, this never occurs, and the pair's suffering affects and changes the society around them. Nel becomes a leader of her community, while Sula the residents of the Bottom unite in their hatred of

her. However, Sula's death causes the falter of the camaraderie and the town resultantly loses its identity. This causes the death of many members of the society, and ultimately leads to blacks leaving the once flourishing town. The futile search for identity parallels *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* as the characters lose themselves in the process. The complexities of identity, and ambivalent effects of nonconformity in *Sula* illustrate the desire for inner peace, which can only be found through friendship and love.

Works Cited

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