

How death affects different characters



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The role of death, both physically and mentally, has a heavy effect on characters in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. Shadrack survives as a soldier during World War I, dealing directly with death that he sees all around. Like Shadrack, Plum returns home emotionally distraught from the war and is killed by his mother out of love. The struggling relationship between Hannah and Eva gets increasingly difficult after Eva kills her own son, Plum, but then sacrifices her own life for her daughter as she burns to death.

The first case of death involves Shadrack, a World War I veteran from the Bottom, who returns from war traumatized after seeing a fellow soldier's head blown off in front of him. While he is in the hospital, his mindset is still as if he is in the war. Before doing any task such as eating, he has to convince himself that he is no longer in battle. Morrison says, " Thus reassured that the white, the red and the brown would stay where they were – would not explode or bust forth from their restricted zones – he suddenly felt hungry and looked around for his hands" (Morrison 9). Shadrack has gotten to the point where he is afraid of everything, including his own hands. He ironically returns from the war less afraid of death than he was when he was in battle and more while in safety. He is not afraid of death itself but rather more afraid of not knowing when his death will occur.

As a means of coping with the unknown, Shadrack creates a national holiday. " He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of it...in this manner he instituted National Suicide Day" (14). Every January 3rd on National Suicide Day, he would walk down the streets with a hanging rope and cowbell encouraging people to kill

themselves or others because it was the only opportunity to escape the memory of death. Those around him know what he went through but still think he is crazy and irrational. As time goes on, people come to accept National Suicide Day as part of their traditions and rituals. After an awful winter and thaw occur, the residents of the town look forward to and participate in National Suicide Day for the first time because it is an event they are used to and helps them to forget about everything that has happened by doing something familiar. Ironically, when the people are ready to participate in full force for the first time, it is also the first time that Shadrack does not want to have the march. For years he marched alone trying to rally supports, and now when he has them, the leader and creator himself no longer wants it to continue.

Shadrack was not the only character used by Morrison who suffered severe mental issues as result of World War I. Eva's son, Plum, returns home from the war much like Shadrack did but, in contrast, turned into a drug addict to cope with his difficulties. Plum's change into a drug addict had numerous signs that were slowly being seen more and more. Hannah as the one to actually find out he was on drugs. Morrison says, " Then he began to steal from them, take trips to Cincinnati and sleep for days in his room with the record player going...It was Hannah who found the bent spoon black from steady cooking." (45). Plum's descent into drugs was over a period of time. They noticed that he was stealing items from his own family members and leaving town to go on random trips. Hannah ends up being the one to fully realize the extent of his drug addiction when she finds the black spoon in his possession.

However, what happens as a result of his drug addiction affects more people than just his own body and self. While sleeping one night, Plum is awakened by his mother who is there to comfort him. They lay there as Eva holds Plum in her arms. Later, he thinks she is pouring water or a liquid on him as a blessing but it turns out not to be. “ He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him... She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight.” (47). After seeing her son in such a state, Eva does not want him to suffer any longer nor does she want to see his drug addiction worsen.

Eva’s decision to toss the lit kerosene stick toward him benefits her own desires as well, though. Throughout Plum’s descent into drug addiction, Eva has had to take care and support Plum far more than a regular child at an adult age. She has essentially had to go backwards in motherhood and treat Plum as if he is a young child again. In order to escape the responsibility of caring for her son, she pours kerosene on his body while he’s sleeping and burns him to death. She burns him to death as a sign of her love for him, but it also shows selfishness in Eva. She thinks the future of those around her is under her control as well as her right so she takes Plum’s matters into her own hands. The concept that a mother would burn her own son to death out of love is confusing and unimaginable to the reader. As the other members of the household, including Hannah and Sula, and the neighbors rush to try and extinguish the fire, Eva stands by watching and raises confusion and questions by everyone else. Hannah and Eva have always had a complicated and struggling relationship, especially since it is common knowledge that

Eva loved Plum more than Hannah. What Eva does to Plum only hurts and strains the relationship between her and Hannah even further.

Eva does, however, show that she still loves her daughter when she risks her own life for her. When Hannah is outside in the yard, her own dress lights on fire and burns her to death. However, Eva, who is watching nearby, nearly sacrifices her own life when she jumps on Hannah trying to extinguish the fire. When she is watching Hannah in the yard from inside the window, she looks away briefly and then back outside towards, witnessing her daughter's dress in flames from head to toe ignited by a yard fire. " She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance. Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own." (75). Instantly, Eva jumps out of the window and runs toward Hannah thinking that if she can cover her up with her own body, she can extinguish the fire and save Hannah's life. Eva's actions contradict the current relationship between the two of them, indicating that Eva does still love her daughter. Neighbors and family members present quickly began pouring water onto both Eva and Hannah but by that time it is too late for Hannah. Her body and flesh has already burned too badly for any chance of recovery. " Hannah died on the way to the hospital. Or so they said. In any case, she had already begun to bubble and blister so badly that the coffin has to be kept closed at the funeral." (77). Both Eva and Hannah were put on stretchers and brought to the hospital together. Upon arrival, Hannah was the priority of the doctors and Eva was simply left on the floor in severe condition because it wasn't as bad as her

daughter's. However, she was left there and fortunately enough was found by a custodian and barely saved. " When Eva got to the hospital they put her stretcher on the floor, so preoccupied with the hot and bubbling flesh of the other...they forgot Eva, who would have bled to death except Old Willy Fields, the orderly, saw blood staining his just-mopped floors." (77).

The tragic event that occurs to Hannah is devastating to all but what is perhaps the most surprising is Eva's reaction. As mentioned before, Plum was always the favorite child and Eva went as far as to say that she didn't even love Hannah. However, in Hannah's time of need, everything that was said did not hold true. Eva risked and nearly sacrificed her own life for her daughter. If Hannah could have lived to see what her mother did to save her life, their relationship most likely would have, for the first time, strengthened.

Toni Morrison used the action of death to further describe the relationships between different characters and how they were affected by the death of others. Although it is common for many relationships to strengthen through death as a method of grieving, more relationships are hurt in a negative way throughout *Sula*. People thought Shadrack's actions were crazy and disregarded them, but, by the end, many of the same people joined him in his efforts. Hannah and her mother's relationship worsens, thinking that her mother does not love her or Plum, but Eva does love her as evidenced by her sacrifice to save Hannah's life. Unfortunately, Hannah is no longer around to see how their relationship could have eventually changed and strengthened. Morrison portrays the relationship between characters by a means of death in unique and effective ways while creating a strong impact on the reader.

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