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Sula Peace: Hatred Breeding Harmony

Scapegoats have often played important roles in history, as people are easily brought together by a shared enemy. They can be a backhanded way to unite a family, a country, or in this case, a town. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, the eponymous character's unconventional lifestyle leads to the town considering her truly evil; however, Sula's unacceptable behavior binds the people together against her in hatred, temporarily bringing out their best that they might contrast more sharply against her intolerable ways.

From a young age, Sula's environment did not set her up for a conventional lifestyle. By contrasting Sula's upbringing with the more acceptable way Nel is raised, Morrison draws a juxtaposition between the two girls, which leads into their very different adult lives. Sula's mother, Hannah, angers every breed of woman in town, from "good" women to "whores" to "middling women," all having their own reasons why her promiscuous behavior was infuriating. Hannah's alternative perspective on matters of sex and love is passed on to Sula as a child, who quickly understands that "sex [is] pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44), which separates her from the other children of Bottom, who still knew little of such matters. By the time Sula is an adolescent, she is tough and daring, and without the fear that seems to set Nel apart when they encounter white boys on the way home from school. Sula's response is a show of strength, "[slashing] off only the tip of her finger" (54) with a paring knife to prove she would

use it, in defense of Nel. The way Sula acts in this situation does not feel natural for a twelve year-old, which reflects how Sula does not naturally fit into the mold one might expect of her. As a child, Sula had atypical audacity and an unconventional understanding of what was appropriate, and while this is forgivable in her childhood, it becomes inexcusable as she grows up.

Sula's return to Bottom solidifies her social standing. Her arrival is "accompanied by a plague of ravens" (89), an omen that the people of Bottom cannot ignore. The birds were a sign of evil, but a natural evil they could withstand and accept. Sula's evil, on the other hand, is not long accepted in her hometown. Her own mother reprimands her for throwing her life away, and for not caring that she has done so. Sula is confident that she "ain't ever going to need [Eva]" (94), and seems unaffected by their interaction. Then Morrison explains Nel's reaction to Sula's return, which is initially very pleased. Sula has always provided clarity in her life, like "having a cataract removed" (95). They get along grudgingly well until Nel finds Sula and her husband "down on all fours naked" (105). In this moment, Sula sacrifices her only friend, doing the same thing she has been doing for years, and appears to remain numb to the consequences. She "had no intimate knowledge of marriage," a legacy left by her mother, and did not realize she would be drawing a line between herself and Nel. From then on, Sula becomes more and more of an outcast in Bottom, which catalyzes a strange reaction from the townspeople. A neglectful mother becomes "sober, clean, and industrious" after falsely believing Sula had injured her child (114). In response to Sula's habit of seducing local men, people "began to cherish their husbands and wives," and altogether improve themselves in defense "against the devil in their midst" (115). By having someone to hate, it made it easier to love each other. When Sula returned to Bottom, she became the scapegoat for their problems, and gave them a reason to band together.

The newfound harmony in Bottom is quick to disintegrate when Sula dies. Her death was “the best news... since the promise of work at the tunnel” (150). From their perspective, Sula’s departure was the loss of an evil they had been fighting for years, and they expected things to improve. However, their joy is eradicated by a horrible killing frost. Beyond that, with the “tension” of Sula gone, the “the reason for the effort” was gone too, and the people of Bottom reverted to their old ways (153). They needed Sula, their representation of bad, to be the black sky against which their stars of goodness could shine. Without her, they see little point in proving themselves. Morrison comparing Sula’s death to the promise of work at the tunnel becomes more interesting as the story finishes, as white workers are given the jobs and then the tunnel collapses on National Suicide Day, killing several of the people of Bottom. In both situations, the townspeople clearly did not understand good from bad, right from wrong. They cling to ideas, that Sula is a plague on the town, or that the tunnel construction will give them jobs to save their families. Their confirmation bias refuses them a chance at changing their minds, and they hold on tighter to their beliefs. Sula, as a target for their hatred, was a convenient way to give themselves a semblance of control, and once she is dead, Bottom falls further apart.

While the people of Bottom would have labeled Sula as a destructive force, the very attitudes and behaviors they claim to detest lead to a marked improvement in their community. Shared hatred unites Bottom. Morrison uses Nel and Sula’s relationship to demonstrate the potential for complexity in either perspective. Despite the affair that drove them apart, Nel mourns the loss of her friend when she remembers their childhoods spent together, perhaps the first but not the last townspeople to realize the good in Sula Peace.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Vintage Books. 1973. Print.