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How The Downfall of an Individual Strengthens a Community

Communities are built and strengthened through the commonality of thoughts and situations between the individuals within it. Whether the commonality is positive or negative, individuals look to others for similarities so that they can gain support. In *Sula* by Toni Morrison, Morrison creates a character who becomes the object of hatred for the community located in The Bottom and essentially the scapegoat for the people to place their hate and false assumptions on. By utilizing Sula as the object of hatred, the community in The Bottom sets their differences aside to unite in being against her, strengthening their bond as a community.

There are various components that cause Sula to become the object of hatred in the community of The Bottom. At a very young age, Sula accidentally drowns Chicken Little as she spun him around near the water. Morrison writes that “there was nothing but... something newly missing” (61) implying that Sula loses her innocence the moment that Chicken Little drowns. Losing one’s innocence that early signifies a point where maturity speeds up significantly. There is no way to take that piece of innocence back because it no longer exists. The only thing that Sula can do to level out her situation is by acting older than her age to gain the attention of others so that there is no questioning her decisions and actions.

As a result to her loss of innocence, Sula begins “acting up, fretting the deweys and meddling the newly married couple” (74) to gain attention from Hannah because she feels

ignored. Though her mother may not have given her the attention she needed, others “remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested.” Since she lost her innocence at such a young age, it makes sense that she would watch her mother burn to death for amusement because of her dark personality caused by a tainted childhood. As an adult, Sula admits that she “stood there watching her burn and was thrilled” because she “wanted her to keep jerking like that” (147). The fact that she was amused by her mother burning shows that Sula has a very twisted mind and does not value human life the same way as others, rather it provides her with selfish pleasure in seeing others struggle.

Besides causing and being a bystander to people dying, Sula proceeds to put Eva in a senior living center because she does not trust her. Eva and Sula do not have the typical grandmother and granddaughter relationship, rather they fight and bicker over little things. There is no mutual respect between Eva and Sula which causes Sula to see Eva as crazy and delusional because they do not see eye to eye. She claims that the reason why she had to put Eva in a care facility is because “she made [her] nervous” (99) and that it was a place where “she could be watched and taken care of” (100). Sula makes it seem as though putting Eva in a care facility is best for her sake, but the actual reason behind her decision is selfish. She puts more emphasis on how Eva being in the house is such a negative situation, but as a grandchild she has the role of being her caretaker and to put up with Eva as much as she hates to because she is family.

Based on the surroundings and people that she grew up around, Sula was bound to become a person with different morals and values. In particular, she becomes a woman who values casual sex and is not aware of how romantic relationships are supposed to work whether she is in one or somehow involved with another couple’s relationship. Sula’s grandmother, Eva,

“had a regular flock of gentleman callers” (41) and her mother, Hannah, “taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent but otherwise remarkable” (44). Starting at a young age, Sula is mainly exposed to casual encounters with the opposite sex rather than committed relationships. This leads to her having a different mentality compared to others in her community as she becomes an adult when she becomes involved with men or others who are in committed relationships. With this kind of background, Sula “had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude” because she had “no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available” (119). Having this type of background also makes it easy for the community to spread rumors about Sula, in particular the one about her sleeping with white men, which taints her reputation immensely. During that time it was a sin to be intermix with other races especially between whites and blacks. It is evident that “there was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier” (113) than to sleep with a white man. Intermixing shows that Sula does not care about who she was with because the only thing that mattered was that she was having sex.

The list of bad things that happens to Sula only grows longer. First, she refuses to give bottles to Teapot and then he falls down the steps on his own. However, his mother claims that “Sula pushed him” (114). Next, Mr. Finley “looked up, saw Sula, and choked on a bone and died on the spot” (114). Lastly, the fact that Shadrack tips his hat to Sula and those in the community see convinces them that Sula is a devil just like Shadrack. There are so many bad things that happen within The Bottom community concerning Sula that the members come together to be against her and the evil that she brings. The community hates Sula and is so convinced that she is

the devil that they claim that God was not three persons, rather four because “the fourth explained Sula” (118).

Although what brings them together is something negative, The Bottom community comes together as one against Sula to protect themselves against the force of evil that they claim she has within. However, since they are being united through something negative it sparks many false assumptions and negative views within the community concerning a single individual. Though the community is strengthened, it is also weakened because it causes everyone within the community to become the same, representing their own type of evil; the evil of hatred and being closed off to people being different than they are.