CSCanada
Cross-Cultural Communication
Vol. 7, No. 4, 2011, pp. 25-29
DOI:10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020110704.028

ISSN 1712-8358[Print]
ISSN 1923-6700[Online]
www.cscanada.net
www.cscanada.org

The Analysis of Sula's Eccentricity in Character: Family and Community's Influence on a Person's Character

L'ANALYSE DE L'EXCENTRICITE DES CARACTERES DU SULA -----DE LA FAMILLE ET DE L'INFLUENCE DE LA COMMUNAUTE SUR LE CARACTERE D'UNE PERSONNE

AN Guiqin[1,*]

[1]Inner Mongolian University for Nationalities Tongliao, China
[*]Corresponding author.
Email: anguiqin@hotmail.com

Received 5 September 2011; accepted 12 November 2011

Abstract
Sula, the heroine in the second novel by Toni Morrison, has attracted the attention of many critics and readers. There are many discussions and reviews on Sula, especially on Sula's character from every perspective. Based on the previous reviews, this paper mainly analyzes Sula's eccentricity in character from the family and community's influence in shaping a person's character, which is of great help for readers to better understand Sula.

Key words: Sula; Character; Eccentricity

Résumé
Sula, l'héroïne du deuxième roman de Toni Morrison, a attiré l'attention de nombreux critiques et lecteurs. Il ya de nombreuses discussions et commentaires sur la Sula, en particulier sur le caractère Sula de chaque perspective. Basé sur les commentaires précédents, cet article analyse essentiellement l'excentricité Sula en personnage de la famille et influence de la collectivité dans le façonnage de caractère d'une personne, qui est d'une grande aide pour les lecteurs de mieux comprendre Sula.

Mots-clés: Sula; Caractère; Excentricité

AN Gui-qin (2011). The Analysis of Sula's Eccentricity in Character: Family and Community's Influence on a Person's Character. *Cross-Cultural Communication, 7*(4), 25-29. Available from: URL: http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020110704.028

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020110704.028

Sula, the second novel by Toni Morrison (1931-), appeals to an increasing number of reviewers, literary critics, and general readers. Many scholars have analyzed it from every kind of critical perspective. It is a complex novel and interweaves the themes of love, friendship, good versus evil, violence, racism, the quest for selfhood, and the role of the family and community in shaping an individual's values. It portrays an eccentric, unmanageable, and unusual new black woman, who matures into a strong and determined woman in the face of adversity and distrust, even hatred by the black community in which she lives.

Although *Sula* did not achieve the immediate success of her *Song of Solomon* (1977), a number of critics extolled the novel as bold, vital, and rich. As stated by Morrison herself, Sula has such a complicated character that it is difficult to define her. She is a black woman who is aware of herself and her own development, which is continuously in motion. She is not a static predictable character and is much more concerned about herself than about anybody else when trying to "make herself".

Described by one critic as a "cracked mirror, fragments and pieces that we have to see independently and put together for ourselves," even Sula's birthmark over one eye is interpreted in various, mostly negative, ways, depending on the perspective of the beholder. To Nel, the mark gives Sula's glance "a suggestion of startled pleasure" (p.96). 1 To Nel's children, the mark is a "scary black thing"(p.97-98).[2] To Jude, it looks like a poisonous snake, which recalls the serpent in the biblical Garden of Eden and symbolizes the carnal sin that the married Jude commits when he has a sexual affair—however brief—

[2]All quotations from Morrison, Toni, *Sula*, (New York:Plume,1973), will now and hereafter be acknowledged by page number.

with Sula. To others, including the narrator, the birthmark is a stemmed rose, adding excitement to an otherwise plain face. This stemmed-rose imagery is a positive symbol of Sula's persevering character. She remains true to herself, which Morrison, by linking Sula's birthmark to the image of the traditionally beautiful rose, emphasizes this aspect as the most important virtue of a spiritually beautiful person. Only Shadrack recognizes the mark as a sign of Sula's developing self; he thinks "she had a tadpole over her eye" (p.156).

Some critics say Sula's eccentricity starts manifesting early in her childhood, even before she departs Medallion in 1927 following Nel's marriage to Jude. Her "unusualness" reveals itself in her inconsistent temperament and moodiness, (p.53) her self mutilation in deterrence of Irish boys, (pp.54-55) her involvement in Chicken Little's accidental drowning, (pp.60-61) in her "acting up, fretting the Deweys and meddling ... newly married couple". It is also communicated in her "dropping things," and also in what the narrator calls her unbearable "sulking and irritation" and, more tellingly, her "craziness" (pp.74-75).

Sula is perceived as a witch, not by her author, but by her own people, chiefly men, who judge her. Sula breaks through all categories and insists on the same privileges that men obtain: sexual liberation, freedom of movement, irresponsibility, lack of social or familial commitment. Some Western feminist critics tend to blame Eva and Hannah for Sula's failure to play the traditional woman's role, and her "evil" actions of arrogance and self-indulgence are partially inherited as a legacy from her family. Sula is a willing pariah. She has "no ego" and no consistency as an individual and "no center, no speck around which to grow on" (p.119). So in this essay the author tries to analyze Sula's eccentric character from family and community perspective.

In *Sula*, one finds a successful case of what Nancy Chodorow terms "the reproduction of mothering"[3] through "social structurally induced psychological processes". She argues that the social context of the mother-daughter relationship structures female personality and relational capacities. Morrison and other Black women writers also recognize the preeminent influence of the mother-daughter relationship, its quality an important determinant of a young girl's successful passage through psychological and moral development, especially in Black culture.

Firstly, Sula's pursuit of rebellion can be traced to her grandmother's influence. Like her grandmother Eva, who sacrifices her own leg in order that her family can survive, Sula equates survival with self-mutilation. She confronts white racists overtly by hurting herself. Abandoned by her husband BoyBoy shortly after having their children, Eva is left without social identity and access to economic resources — marriage and husband supposedly providing for both of these things in a society that saw marriage as a woman's only means for self-realization. Without a male figure present she has to fend not only for herself but for her children as well. Eva leaves town for eighteen months and makes a genuine sacrifice — her leg for insurance money to feed her children.

Secondly, her "evil" actions of arrogance and self-indulgence are partially inherited as a legacy from her family. However, Sula is more strange and formidable than her mother and grandmother because they are first of all acting within the confines of the community and their sensibilities are informed by it. Eva is generous, wide-spirited and makes great sacrifices. Hannah does not want to disturb anything. She does her work and takes care of her mother. They try their best to conform to convention. But Sula, as a New World Black woman, is worse than both Eva and Hannah. She has taken the lives and lessons of both grandmother and mother, combined them into one, and creates her own. She goes to the farthest against the conventional morals and values among the Peace women. As Morrison writes:

> Sula was distinctly different. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life. (p.118)

Thirdly, these critics also agree that the emotional distance between Sula and her mother and grandmother restricts Sula's capacity for emotional well-being. Hudson-Weems and Samuels believe that "… failure to provide the socialization, identity, love and security that are essential to healthy growth and development" will affect "one's sense of self and later relationship".[4] In analyzing Sula's family background, it is found that both Eva and Hannah are "distant mothers" (p.52) who cannot provide emotional support. As for Eva, deserted in young motherhood by her husband, she has been away for eighteen months and has thrown herself in the path of a train, not to kill herself, but to claim compensation for the leg she loses. This physical separation is a sign and symbol of an emotional distance from others, for Hannah asks at one point, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (p.67) Eva tries to stay alive in order that her children might live. Without the memory of maternal love, Hannah is unable

[3]Nancy Chodorow (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
[4]Wilfred D. Sammels and Clenora Hudson-Weems (1990). *"Experimental Lives: Meaning and Self in Sula" in Toni Morrison* (p.32). Boston: Twayne Publishers.

to develop love for her daughter.

Fultz argues that "Hannah's inability to like her daughter is linked to her own mother's inability or failure to give Hannah the feeling of being liked. Hannah has no experimental knowledge or maternal role model for this aspect of the mother-daughter bond".[5] Hannah, in turn, bequeaths to Sula, a capacity for emotional distance from others that allows for the creation of a true self but lacks empathy, a crucial element in completing the process of female self-development as well.

In one sense, Sula' s early separation from her mother provides her with the freedom and independence necessary to concentrate upon her feelings and thoughts without being controlled. On the other hand, without proper guidance and moral education from her mother, she has "no ego" and no consistency as an individual. Without the frame to define herself, Sula is like "an artist with no art form" and becomes "dangerous".

Sula dares to defy society's restrictive traditions in order to recreate herself freely. She, however, ends up dying a lonely and desperate death because Sula's role model failed to give her a path she could follow. Having seen the worst aspects of her grandmother's and mother's love, Sula had rejected the traditional feminine role and sought to define herself in a way that differs from all she has known.

It can be said that without maternal bonding, people have difficulty establishing human connections in later life. Sula' s estrangement from her mother is further demonstrated by the fact that she watches her mother' s accidental death by burning without running to rescue her. Sula watches her mother burning "not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested". (p.78) Eva, who sees Sula standing on the porch just looking at her mother while she burns, later accuses Sula of wickedness. However, Sula, just before she dies, recalls in such words: "I did not mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing" (p.147).

Some critics claims that Sula's major vulnerability is her dissolving responsibility as a willing pariah, which results from the fact that she misunderstands her mother and grandmother's maternal love and cuts herself off from the sustenance of maternal connectedness thus becoming a willing pariah, and an artist without art form.

Under the racist, gender and class oppression, maternal love was distorted, causing a barrier for the daughter's self-development. Especially in the black community, physical survival was priority. Black mothers had to shoulder the responsibility to be a breadwinner and nurturer, both a ship and the harbor. Therefore, they were deprived of time to offer tender care for their children to develop their empathy. for black mothers, nurturing and endearment are second to the basic necessities. As Chodorow argues that:

> Black females [that] are socialized by adult figures in early life to become strong, independent women, who because of precarious circumstances growing out of poverty and racism, might have to eventually become heads of their own households. Black mothers teach their female offsprings to perform adult tasks…. [6]

As a result, Sula developed into a scarred black woman for the lack of affection from her maternal figures. She travels the road of life with little support from her mother. Sula, in trying to define herself as the "new world black woman" effectively separates herself from the laws and restrictions of society. Without a mother to emulate or guide her on her journey to womanhood, Sula seems to have fallen by the wayside and be without the strength or know how to save herself from destruction.

Besides her small family, community, as a bigger family, is partially responsible for Sula's eccentric character. Sula is a willing pariah as she does not blindly accept the social norms the community has set for women. In fact, she breaks from every expectation the black community has for a woman. She pursues herself, exploring her emotions and imagination. Her world is hers, but left without a focus for her imagination, she becomes destructive, and because her stance seems contrary to the survival of her community, she is left alone — estranged from others. She also looks different from the women of her age in the Bottom:

> "Sula did not look her age. She was near thirty and, unlike them, had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck. It was rumored that she had had no childhood diseases, was never to known to have chicken pox, croup or even a runny nose. Except for a funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark, she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability" (p.115).

This is further evidence for the town people to confirm that Sula is evil. In weird coincidental ways, she is an embodiment of things they had never seen in their community before. This difference is just another way the community seeks to label her as wicked and strange. They place all their fears about the unknown into their growing hatred for Sula.

Sula's roaming in the noisy, disordered, exciting American cities means not only a physical traveling through space but also an internal journey of self-discovery. When she returns, her potential narcissism, her difference has become real. This is visually evident from the very moment she reaches the town, before she speaks

[5]Lucille P. Fultz (1991). "Images of motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved." In Patricial Bell-Scott et al. (Ed.), *Double Stitch. Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters* (pp.30-41). New York: Harper Perennial.
[6]Nancy Chodorow (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (p.100). Berkeley: University of California Press.

a word, because in her manner of dress she is like a movie star, and this establishes a considerable distance between her and the women in the Bottom:

> When she had come back home, social conversation was impossible for her because she could not lie. She could not say to those old acquaintances, 'Hey, girl, you looking good', when she saw how the years had dusted their bronze with ash, the eyes that had once opened wide to the moon bent into grimy sickles of concern. The narrower their lives, the wider their hips. Those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people's skinned dreams and bony regrets…. (pp.121-22)

Sula continues to engage in self-destructive behavior by living an independent, defiant, and self-indulgent life, deliberately cutting herself off from those who care about her, and separating herself from the community. What's more, she does not possess a suitable outlet. In Marie Nigro's article, "In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's Sula", Nigro examines the character of Sula and how she does not possess a suitable outlet for her creativity or energy. Without a suitable outlet, Nigro says: "Sula becomes dangerous, and causes her to self-destruct. Had Sula taken a job or had some constructive outlet, maybe she would have been able to define herself instead of isolating herself".[7] As Morrison writes:

> In a way, her strangeness, her naivete, her craving for other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restless and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous (p.121).

Negro also claims that the community too does not have a productive outlet. They sit around and talk about Sula and her life while they could be doing something more productive. Therefore, after Sula dies the community does not know what to do with all of their unfocused energy. Perhaps that is why the people of the Bottom start to rage and tear up the tunnel on National Suicide Day. They cause their own demise with their unfocused energy.

In conclusion, Sula can be named as a new world black woman as she dares to defy society's restrictive traditions and contests the concept of female sexuality and motherhood in search of self. She is a pioneer seeking her true self by revolting against double discrimination and oppression. She openly rebels against all that is white and male, and the invisible cruel system that oppresses and distorts black women's individuality. Sula had rejected the traditional feminine role and sought to define herself in a way that differs from all she has known. She rebels against what patriarchal society has deemed her role: that of having babies and taking care of a husband, by living an experimental live. Morrison's craft of allowing Sula to be both good and evil allows her character to emerge as the defining new world black woman: a preserver and a destroyer at the same time. The black community needs her as much as, or perhaps more than, she needs it.

Sula is eccentric in her defiance against the forces which confine women within the realm of mothering. She poses a challenge not only to the stereotypes of black women created by whites, but also to the black community's constraints imposed upon black women, as she contests the concept of female sexuality and motherhood in search of self. She is a pioneer seeking her true self by revolting against double discrimination and oppression. Although Sula died at the age of thirty, her short life was of great significance for black women to express their creativity, to pursue their freedom in making oneself, to seek their identity, to prove their political, racial and sexual equality to the whites and males in a patriarchal society.

It is so limited to analyze Sula's eccentric character from family and community's perspective and it is not fair just to blame Sula's mother, grandmother and the community for sula's eccentricity. It is the whole society that should be responsible for the situation because under the sexual and racial discrimination, black women's living environment is so terrible that they have no other choice in order to survive. Eva and Hannah are no exception, they have to follow suit.

REFERENCES

Bakerman, Jane (1978). The Seams Can't Show: An interview with Toni Morrison. *Black American Literature Forum, 12*.

Bell, Roseann P. (1988). *Rev of Sula Critical Essays on Toni Morrison.* Boston: Hall.

Chodorow, Nancy (1978). *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Christian, Barbara T. (1985). *Black Feminist Criticism.* New York: Pergamon.

Ellison, Ralph (1972). *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books.

Evans, Marie (1984). *Black Women Writers: 1950-1980, A Critical Evaluation.* New York: Doubleday.

Furman, Jan. (1996). *Toni Morrison's Fiction.* Columbia S. C: University of South Carolina Press.

Fultz, Lucille P. (1991). Images of motherhood in Toni Morrison's Beloved. *Double Stitch Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters*. Ed. Patricial Bell-Scott et al. New York: Harper Perennial, 30-41.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Appiah, K. A. (Eds.). (1993). *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present.* New York: Amistad.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1984). *Black Literature and Literary Theory.* New York and London: Methuen.

[7]Marie Nigro (1998), In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's Sula. *Journal of Black Studies, 28,* 730.

Grant, Robbrert (1988). Absence into Presence: The Thematics of Memory and "Missing Subject" in Toni Morrison's Sula. In Nellie Y. McKay (Ed.), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison.* Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co..

Harding, Wendy & Martain, Jacky (1994). *A World of Difference — An Inter-cultural study of Toni Morrsion's Novels.* Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press.

McKey, Nellie Y. (Ed.). (1988). *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co..

Middleton, David L. (Ed.). (1997). *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism.* New York: Garland Pub.

Morrison, Toni (1970). *The Bluest Eye.* New York: Washington Square Press.

Morrison, Toni (1973). *Sula*. New York: Plume.

Morrison, Toni (1994). Playing in the Dark. *Whiteness and the Literature Today, 68,* 5-8.

Morrison, Toni (1984). Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation. In Marie Evans (Ed.), *Black Women Writers* (1950-1980). New York: Doubleday.

Morrison, Toni (1994). Lecture and Speech of Acceptance, Upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature. *The Nobel Lecture in Literature*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Morrison, Toni (1989). Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The African American Presence in American Literature. *Michigan Quarterly Review, 28*, 1-34.

Nigro, Marie (1998). In Search of Self: Frustration and Denial in Toni Morrison's Sula. *Journal of Black Studies, 28.*

Peach, Linden (1995). *Macmillan Modern Novelists: Toni Morrision*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.

Rigney, Barbara (1991). *The Voices of Toni Morrison*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Russell, Sandi (1988). It's OK to Say OK. In Nellie Y. McKay (Ed.), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Co..

Samuels, Wilfered D. and Hudson-Weems, Clenora (1990). *Toni Morrison*. Boston, MA: Twayne.

Smith, Valerie (1987). *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Spiller, Hortense J. (2001). *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Tally, Justine. (1999). *Toni Morrison's Histories and Truths*. Lit, Piscataway, NJ: Hambury.

Taylor-Guthrie, Danille (Ed.). (1994). *Conversations with Toni Morrrison.* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Walker, Melissa. (1991). *Down from the Mountaintop: Black Women's Novels in the Wake of the Civil Rights Movement 1966-1989.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Walker, Alice. (1983). *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Weinstein, Phillip M. (1996). *What Else but Love?: The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Willis, Susan (1987). *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience.* Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

CHANG Yaoxin (1987). *History and Anthology of American Literature.* Tianjin, China: Nankai University Press.

WU Weiren (1990). *History and Anthology of American Literature.* Beijing, China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.