Sula As A Defiant Self-exile Essay, Research Paper

Sula in Tony Morrison’s Sula as a Defiant Self-Exile

Morrison’s Sula, features a protagonist who shares her name with the book who has the decided attitude not to form social bonds in the Bottom, a black district inside, Medallion. Sectioned into two parts, the book divides between Sula Peace’s coming-of-age experience before she leaves the Bottom and her return to the Bottom as a mature woman. Sula’s unusual exorbitance results from an eccentric upbringing that openly accepts and welcomes transience. Thus due to her upbringing in the Bottom, Sula becomes a defiant exile upon her return.

One of the areas that Sula isolates herself from is her family. The narrator describes Sula’s house as a “throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors . . .” (52), which suggests a family accustomed to spontaneous disruptions and fleeting alliances. The distance between Peace mothers and daughters in Sula, then, allows the daughters considerable freedom in fashioning an independant self. An unrestricted household such as the Peace Family, builds Sula into an impetuous and independent freethinker.

When she and her best friend, Nel, encounter the usual bullies on a short-cut back home, Sula does not seek Nel’s help but promptly cuts her own little finger off to intimidate them (54). Sula, already a composed figure who is accustomed to constant changes at home is, however, shaken by her unexpected hand in the death of a neighborhood boy named Chicken Little. Before Chicken’s demise, Sula helps him up a tree and “She followed the boy, steadying him, when he needed it, with her hand and her reassuring voice” (60). Sula, the unintentional grim reaper, promises Chicken such security before sending him flying into the river, that the abruptness of his end strikes Sula.

Sula experiences two other life-changing disruptions besides Chicken Little’s accident. One involves an overheard statement that her mother, Hannah, makes about her. Hannah is baking and conversing with her two friends, when Sula comes in the house and hears Hannah’s statement about loving Sula but not liking her (57). The most probable effect of Hannah’s words, to disturb Sula not because of its raw honesty but because it came so unexpectedly, is rather almost the opposite. Hannah’s words act as a determiner for Sula’s deviance; the narrator does not deny that Hannah’s comment does affect Sula, but the effect is to clarify an independence-to teach `her that there was no other that you could count on’ including her family and mother.

The second life-changing disruption occurs when Sula’s mother dies. Hannah’s death, which should have been the foremost disrupting event in Sula’s life, turns out to be the most anticlimactic of them all. Sula simply watches as her mother burns. She feels no fear, no hope, and does not rush to save Hannah (78). Sula, at this point, has reached the plateau of her isolation from others. But she postpones her departure from her community, the Bottom, until sometime after Nel’s wedding.

Sula does not rely on her family or community to provide emotional sustenance. She perceives herself in solitude and therefore depends only on herself to change her environment. This conviction is solidified “ever since her mother’s remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle” (118). After these emotional disruptions, Sula lets her feelings dictate her decisions, such as her affair with Nel’s husband. The affair is based on ambivalence and immediacy centered on herself. Martin Gloege offers the explanation of Sula’s self-love “as a panacea for self-loss . . .” and that self-love is really “the self claiming ownership of itself to avert fragmentation” (170). In her search for control and self-fulfillment, Sula ultimately becomes as transient and chaotic as life itself so that she will flow with life and never be surprised.

Despite Sula’s detachment towards relationships, she longs for a “version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand” (121). Sula originally finds herself in Nel, but since Nel “belonged to the town and all of its ways” (120), Sula turns to Ajax. Ajax, a man who initiates a meeting with Sula, accepts her transient ways and talks to her as his equal. When she attempts to sustain the relationship, she discovers her absolute lack of control when Ajax abandons her at the first hint of potential commitment. Cynthia Davis makes a keen observation about Sula: “she lapses into the possessiveness she scorned in Nel. But when she recognizes her failure, she sees it as rooted not in Nel’s conformism but in her own isolation” (16). Again, by endeavoring to reach emotional fulfillment and security without the need of people, she may become a strong individual, but she cannot ward off the unaccounted hurt that she suffers.

Besides absorbing the transient relationships in her private world, she also has to face the effects of her transience on her social sphere. Sula’s disregard and separation from the community does not go unwarranted. Sula has breached what the locals deem acceptable and necessary: she puts her grandmother in a nursing home and she commits the “unpardonable sin” by sleeping with white men (112). Once the townspeople learn of those deeds, they start to scrutinize her with increased fervor. But despite their mounting criticism, Sula remains undaunted because she expects as much from the community. Sula is instead caught off-guard by the desertion first of Nel then of Ajax. From a woman whose solitude “never admitted the possibility of other people” (123), she finds little reason to live after their departure. As she fingers Ajax’s discarded belongings, she exhales in deep resignation, signaling to the reader that her end is near.

Sula no longer views family ties and social/cultural cohesion as wellsprings of stability and permanency. In the past, conformity promiseu her an indemnity from judgment and abandonment. Sula, however, find no solace from such promises anymore, and only seem to find relief after she extracts herselves from the community. Death and other disruptive forces strongly influence her detachment towards others. For Sula, death illuminates her perception of the ephemeral. She struggles to hold on and to let go at the same time, and she cannot find a place that allows her this paradoxical fulfillment. Restless, she remains in her hometown that only offers opposition, but still, this sojourner persist, searching the familiar terrain of home for the unattainable.

Bibliography:

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Note: Paper origonated from Georgia Tech, March 1998. Hope you enjoy this bit of work…-D.Gutowski