

Beyond Bonding: Exploring the rejection of social norms through friendship in *Sula*¹

The bond formed between people as they develop relationships is integral in shaping and determining the character of those within the relationship. Throughout *Sula*, Morrison examines the effects of various relationships including marriage (Eva and BoyBoy, Helene and Wiley Wright), non-marital sexual relations (Hannah, Sula), and maternal (Eva and Plum or Hannah, Helene and Nel, Hannah and Sula). Social convention posits that the most coveted and highly valued relationship between humans is that of a marriage. In particular it is the relationship between a husband and a wife that guarantees social value. However, Morrison's examination of a variety of types of bonds in connection with one another complicates this normative narrative. In particular, Morrison explores the effects and consequences of the most innocent-seeming of relationships— that which forms between two girls with similar experiences.

Morrison makes clear that Nel and Sula are separate girls with separate experiences; however, the resilient bond that they share, formed through childhood and lasting through death, complicates society's imposition that marriage is the ultimate goal. It is Eva, old and perhaps a little senile, who explicitly states the depth of the girls' connection. Says Eva to Nel, "You. Sula. What's the difference?" (168). Early in their friendship, Nel, raised by her mother's influence, learns to step outside social boundaries, physically and in her disposition, take control of her context, and define herself without the need for others. When the girls drift apart, Nel reverts, finding ease and comfort in her normative role as Jude Greene's wife. It is only when Sula returns and Nel feels the bond's familiar pull, does she learn the importance of the bond and its role in her ability to define herself outside the boxes allotted to her by society. Through the relationship between Nel and Sula and through the blurring of the distinction between the girls,

¹ *Sula*. Toni Morrison (1998)

Morrison explores the importance of such a bond for self-growth and suggests that it is because of the influence of such a relationship (and not the socially imperative marital relationship) that allows Nel to ultimately reject her role as “good” daughter and wife.

Before meeting Sula, Nel’s life is defined physically and emotionally by her mother Helene. When she married and moved to Medallion, Helene, vowed to create a new life for herself as far as possible from the shame of her own mother’s prostitution profession and thus demands her daughter uphold the ideal picture of a traditional and socially acceptable family. By Helene’s hand, Nel is groomed and curtailed so as to perfectly fit her mother’s ideal image of a daughter and “[a]ny enthusiasm that little Nel Showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). Helene even demands that her daughter be physically constrained to fit an ideal social image and insists that Nel “pull her nose” in order to overcome its broad flatness. In contrast to Nel, Sula has no one to physically or emotionally insist that she conform to a model of society. Instead, she comes from an enormous house with countless and almost non-functional rooms where she is “wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices, and the slamming of doors” (52). Until she meets Sula Peace, Nel is subjugated to the confines of society and plays the role of “good” daughter that her mother taught her. It is through her friendship with Sula forms that Nel begins to define her own meaning of self and reject the boundaries set by her mother.

We first see Nel stepping over the social boundaries Helene erected when they return from their trip to see Helene’s grandmother only to find that she passed before they could arrive. Feeling how the journey and the discovery of her mother’s “custardness” has changed her, Nel looks into the mirror and, for the first time, lays claim to herself. Staring into the mirror, “[e]ach time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (28).

Through her friendship with Sula, Nel nurtures her new found “me-ness” and finds space to grow. The initiation of their friendship “was intense as it was sudden” (53); their bond did not start gradually and grow, rather, it began almost instinctively and they felt “the ease and comfort of old friends” (52). Their differences, in their home life and their mothers, and their similarities, through their absent fathers and their only-childness, draw Nel and Sula so that they can create themselves in relation to someone as similar as themselves. For both girls, this bond provides space, sanitized of society, in which they “could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things (55). Nel’s sense of self grows beyond that which her mother designates such that she begins to hide the clothespin for pulling her nose and the smooth hair of the hot comb no longer appeals to her. The strength of the bond between Nel and Sula grows to such strength that at times “they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (83).

Morrison further explicates the bond between the girls by demonstrating the sense of completeness when they are together and their ability to communicate without speaking. In particular, she carefully illustrates their wordless play in the dirt and the grass by the river. Their movements and intentions in complete synchronization and “without ever meeting each other’s eyes”, Sula and Nel trace intricate patterns in the dirt and strip twigs to “creamy innocence” (58). Their communication transcends the need or want of words. Language is itself, a social construction of rules and enforcers of rules; to communicate without the use of words is to communicate without the need to trespass on the boundaries of society. Nel and Sula succeed in circumventing the social construction of language — their play is their language. When they lose interest in grass and intricate dirt patterns, Sula and Nel begin digging into the dirt, each girl starting out with her own hole. The creation of these holes in the dirt takes concentration and

“[t]ogether they worked until the two holes were one and the same” (58). These two girls begin as two separate lives and the boundary between them becomes blurred as their bond forms. The holes that they dig mimic the progression of their self-growth — from two into one. Indeed, the girls “use each other to grow on” and define their experiences in terms of each other instead of what society dictates, just as they fill their single hole “until all of the small defiling things they could find were collected there” (59). These small seemingly unimportant objects, pieces of glass and cigarette butts, may represent the events and experiences of these little black girls in 1922 that society deems unimportant but which they collect anyway. They are collected in spite of society, in spite of what Helene might think of her daughter playing in the dirt with what amounts to as trash, and they are purposefully protected as Nel and Sula carefully “replac[e] the soil and [cover] the entire grave with uprooted grass” (59). Throughout this scene, Morrison depicts a natural transgression of a human life— one starting by stripping away to get at a core innocence that is used to carve a fresh path or purpose; the hole carved out by an individual joins someone else’s and together the two (or possibly more than two) collect small but purposeful events, emotions, and experiences.

Nel grows into herself through her relationship with Sula, but it is an unfortunate accident resulting in Chicken Little’s death that drives (a temporary) wedge between the girls. When Chicken Little’s hands slip innocently out of Sula’s and he sails out across and disappears under the water, the event is shocking in its calmness. Already, we see Nel slipping back into the well-conditioned tracks of Helene’s influence; she is the one to break the shocked silence with her concern that “[s]omebody saw” (61). Instead of reacting with an expression of emotion, Nel is concerned with the social consequences of being responsible for Chicken Little’s death. Subsequently, at the funeral, instead of feeling the grief for Chicken Little, “Nel’s legs had

turned to granite and she expected the sheriff or Reverend Deal's pointing finger at any moment" (64-65). So concerned is she with being caught and implicated in association with such an event that has brought out all the social circles of Medallion together, that Nel worries more for her own social sanctity than Chicken Little's death. She is frozen in the pew and "although she knew she had 'done nothing,' she felt convicted and hanged right there" (64-65). Sula, in stark contrast, is saturated with emotion. She cries "[s]oundlessly and with no heaving and gasping for breath, she let[s] the tears roll into her mouth and slide down her chin to dot the front of her dress" (65). Nel, because of her mother's training and perhaps her own unique understanding of social fear, cannot understand or emulate Sula's grief. For Nel, the fact that she had "done nothing" is equivalent in saying that she had "done nothing wrong" because she, physically, was not the one to swing Chicken Little to his death. Still, in the back of her mind, it seems, that this logic is not quite sound, for she retains a fear of being found out by the social rule enforcers — the sheriff and the reverend. This difference in reaction drives a wedge between the girls and there grows "a space, a separateness, between them" (64). Later we see that "the space that had sat between them in the pews had dissolved" (66). Outside of the church, outside of the house of social order, Nel comes back to Sula. However, now that this space between the girls has been realized, it cannot be undone. We see that this separateness lingers tentatively on the boundary of their friendship, waiting.

It is Nel's marriage to Jude, this introduction of a new kind of relationship, that brings the separateness between the two girls back. Sula, wanting "Nel to shine" and under the impression that Nel, like herself, makes purposeful and meaningful decisions, lets Nel shift into her new bond with Jude. Unlike the forging of Nel and Sula's bond, the relationship between Jude and Nel is born out of Jude's "rage, rage, and a determination to take on a man's role" (82). Rather

than a mutually nurturing relationship, Jude wants “someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply” (82). Nel would be his “someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up” when his edges ran ragged as he cut his way into manhood (83). And in a different way that Sula and Nel formed one mutual soul, “[t]he two of them together would make one Jude” (83). Nel’s role as a wife differs drastically from her role as a friend. While with Sula, the dregs of imagination and uniqueness that Helene had not managed to quash, ignite. But with Jude, she is the backdrop, the context on which he can build himself. But for Nel, perhaps slipping back into the easiness of being socially liked and respected by those who envied her, “greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly” (84). She does not seem to mind that her singleness stands out because of her applicability to fit Jude’s needs.

Although Nel settles into her role as Jude’s wife neatly and easily, when Sula returns to Medallion the bond between the old friends returns instinctively. Even after years apart the raw and instinctual relationship between them, one which transcended words in their childhood, is still described in physically personal and intimate ways. For Nel, Sula’s return is like “getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed” (95). For 10 years, Nel’s purpose and vision of herself has been to contextualize Jude and raise her children, fulfilling the role of a “good” wife as she once fulfilled the role of “good” daughter. But, while Nel recognizes the familiar feel of her childhood friendship and the way it allowed her to shine and grow her “me-ness,” it seems that having stayed so long within the confines of her role as wife and mother has opened up the separateness that threatened during Chicken Little’s funeral. In arguing about Eva’s involvement over burning Plum, a feat so unimaginable to the rule-abiding Nel, “[t]he closed place in the water spread before them” (101). The memory of the event that first began to pull at their bond resurfaces in their differences in opinion after being apart for 10 years. Here, Morrison explores

the changes in two women whose bond transcends language but whose experiences have been molded by time without the other. Nel seems hesitant to step over the boundaries of society as she had once done in the beginnings of her friendship with Sula. Having become one of these boundary makers (“one of *them*” (120)), herself, to Nel it was clear that “[w]hen it came to matters of grave importance, [Sula] behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left others to straighten it out” (101). From her perspective now, Nel approaches each memory in her past from a judgement of “good” and “bad.” For example, in Nel’s eyes Sula spent too much time reacting emotionally to Chicken Little’s death leaving Nel to “straighten it out,” that is to make sure no one saw them and to make sure nothing implicates their connection. For Nel to be emotional is to be irresponsible.

Nel’s inability to emote even in response to shocking or upsetting events is evidence of her confinement to a social box first marked out by her mother then later, marked out by herself as Jude’s wife. When she finds Sula and Jude together, she does not know how to call forth her emotions and expel them. In the “grief that [has] twisted her into a curve on the floor,” (108), Nel waits for something to happen. Such a raw emotional release is not natural to her, but she waits for the “oldest cry,” it is “[a] scream not for others, not in sympathy for a burnt child, or a dead father, but a deeply personal cry for one’s own pain”(108). Throughout her life, Nel has witnessed several displays of unchecked emotional release; there is Sula at Chicken Little’s funeral and Eva trying to reach the burning Hannah. But Nel has never herself experienced or had to experience this release. Here it seems that she understands that this emotional release is deeply personal and necessary, as she is waiting almost desperately for it to overcome her. Subsequently, she realizes that she cannot rely on her relationship with Sula to overcome or bury the feeling and she herself must be the one to experience the release. But “her very own howl”

does not come. Nel is unable to release the instinctive emotions that will help her respond to the shocking event which she has just encountered.

In her inability to rectify her emotions with a howling release, the anger and grief inside Nel turns outward, targeting Sula. Through the rest of their friendship and Sula's death, Nel holds tight to the conviction (and her safe social nest) that Sula is the sole purpose of her unhappiness and loneliness. The bond she had with Jude has long been broken (or perhaps had never really formed at all) and the bond she had with Sula seemed to die the very day Nel found her with Jude. But it is her visit with Eva who, even in her addled state, explicitly states the blurred relationship between her and Sula that Nel fully realizes the strength and impact of that friendship. As Nel comes to the realization that Sula's emotional reactions and experiences were a part of her own reactions and experiences, she feels inside herself the leaves stirring, the mud shifting, and "there was the smell of overripe green things" (174). Only in reaction to the full realization of the loss of this strong and intimate connection with Sula, does Nel's emotions begin to stir. Finally, she is able to howl a "fine cry— loud and long— but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (174). Nel's emotional release comes as the realization of her loss blooms. This connection once blurred the lines between these two girls, making them virtually indistinguishable. Throughout their friendship, the relationship has been described as two wholes coming together to make another entire whole. Nel, after the death of Sula, is finally able to release emotion, an act that Sula alone of the two was able to perform. It is as if Nel, upon realizing the depth of their relationship and with Sula dead, takes on the role of both girls in order to reconcile the emotional turmoil that has been building up inside her all these years. Through this intimate and raw relationship, we have seen Nel grow beyond the

boundaries of her social role, step back into them, and finally release herself in a fine cry of emotional release— a final rejection of her social confinement.