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**Failed Love: Criticism of an Insistence on Freedom in *Sula***

*Sula* is critical of its protagonist’s success by showing how Sula’s insistence on freedom creates a disconcerting difficultly for her to form a positive personal relationship. Love is antithetical to freedom because love is a type of obligation and demands that she be willing to compromise her individuality. Toni Morrison illustrates, through Sula Peace’s relationship with her lover Ajax, how their pursuits of an “experimental life” is incompatible with the formation of an enduring relationship—an impulse as basic as the desire for autonomy.

Sula’s relationships are all affected by her experiment: What happens if one acts with complete freedom? Sula spends her entire life resisting the racial, gender, and social roles prescribed to her. She pursues her independence by never obeying (or honoring) the differences between people. This experiment is due to her awareness of how a person is a product and prisoner of their environment and biology. But most of all, it is a product of her loyalty to herself above all others.

The destruction of social mores comes through violence and alienating behavior because those are the two types of behavior most opposed to the perpetuation of peace. When her best friend Nel Wright is bullied by four older, white boys, Sula responds by seeking a physical confrontation. When this happens, Sula uses self-inflicted violence—slicing off the tip of her finger with a knife—to unnerve the boys. “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” she asks them (55). By demonstrating her readiness to receive pain, Sula best proves her willingness to cause pain—as well as her disregard for the expectation that people will always seek to avoid violence and pain. Her refusal to be limited by her identity as a black woman in a male- and white-dominated, family-oriented community also calls for a readiness to be alienated and a willingness to alienate others. Sula is shunned by the town after she puts Eva in a home, after she pursues sexual independence by sleeping with both married and single men, and most of all, after she ignores the boundaries of race by sleeping with white men.

Sula dies believing in the success of her experiment. She triumphs in putting her interests and desires above those expected from her. Even though she becomes a pariah, she even claim her alienation as a triumph: “my lonely is *mine*” (143), she corrects Nel. As long as she owns herself, her feelings, and her actions, Sula is living with integrity, the value which matters most to her. This integrity is important because she is driven by a sense of carpe diem—her understanding that one should approach inevitable death “like one of those redwoods” (143).

But this triumph is undermined by the impossibility of reconciling love with her experiment. Like gender and race, attachment to another person becomes another tie which binds if it forms a sense of obligation that inhibits behavior and desire. This is an obligation Sula resists. In their final conversation, Nel chastises Sula for sleeping with her husband: Sula never loved Jude—she only used him to fill “this space in front of me, behind me, in my head” (144) and she “didn’t love [Nel] enough to leave him alone” (145). Sula denies that this should have affected their friendship, for the Sula’s love for Nel is separate from the obligation of not causing those you love harm—an obligation incompatible with her goal of autonomous gratification.

The opposition between love and autonomy is told again, but with Sula on the receiving end of pain. It is because of her feelings for Ajax that Sula “began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire of it.” (131). This impulse exerts an unfamiliar power over Sula—it makes her self-conscious. What initially attracted Ajax to Sula was her refusal to please anyone; now her desire replaces this refusal with a new eagerness. She ties a green ribbon in her hair, cleans the bathroom, makes the bed, and sets the table for two. Upon detecting “the scent of the nest” (133), Ajax, who is her double, reciprocates her resistance to attachment and obligation, and he leaves. Just as Sula refuses to believe in a love that should hold her back, Ajax is also repulsed by this possessive and domesticizing quality of love.

Then, being always as able to give pain as she is able to receive it, Sula exercises her ability to match Ajax’s desertion. His place in Sula’s memory vanishes as quickly as he does from her life. Initially, Sula is stunned by his absence and the way it transforms her surroundings and even her own bearings—much like Nel. This only lasts until Sula finds Ajax’s drivers license and discovers that his name was not Ajax, but Albert Jacks. Instead of proving his existence, this artifact of his identity leads Sula to alienate Ajax in a more permanent way. Sula uses this to delegitimize their connection, saying, “If I didn’t know his name, then there is nothing I did know…how could he help but leave me since he was making love to a woman who didn’t even know his name” (136). The end of their relationship has a negative effect on Sula, for her last thought as the relationship vanishes is a refutation of newness and discovery. She falls asleep to a melody which she initially can’t identify, but the mystery vanishes in the negative realization that “There aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are” (137).

Sula’s stubborn insistence on complete freedom is woven with a solipsistic worldview. Ajax and Sula’s deliberate desertion of their relationship shows how pursuit of complete self-rule is also self-destructive—leading to personal detriment. Even as Sula reaches her goals, her mixed experiences with her relationships are disconcerting. She triumphs because she claims her own life, but this triumph is also undermined because it is impossible for her to truly share her life with someone else.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Vintage, 2004. Print.