

Environmental and Social Influences on Sula

There are numerous factors that must be taken into account when trying to understand the characters in Toni Morrison's novel Sula. As in any person's life, one must carefully learn about and examine the multiple influences and experiences (past and present) relevant to the time period and social context in which that person developed and changed. It was quite difficult trying to piece together the many fragments presented in this novel because there were so many characters, and because just as in real life, events are personal, unordered, and influenced in many ways. Thus, in trying to piece together the whole life picture of Sula, all characters must be discussed because understanding of one individual is impossible without taking into consideration how others have influenced their life both positively and negatively.

In Sula, the characters are inseparable from their community and families. While both were the cause of traumatic pain and emotional anguish, they at the same time were positive in that they made the characters resilient to pain that would have been completely insurmountable without one another. As in any clinical situation, both positive and negative influences are of utmost importance as a positive outcome is dependent on working with the context in which one is entrenched, so that one can learn to be confident, healthy, and secure when faced with life's many difficulties that will inevitably arise throughout the lifespan.

Sula and Nel's development is heavily influenced by intergenerational values and child-rearing practices. It all starts with Eva who is the matriarch, or "creator and sovereign" (p.30, 1921) of the large number of homeless families that she takes into her home. Eva resides on the top floor of the home, and even adults "look up at her" although she usually sits on a child's wagon for easier mobility (p.31, 1921). Because Boy Boy leaves her after just five years of marriage, she is forced to abandon her three children for 1½ years so that she can earn enough money for their subsistence. Leaving her children for so long, and at such a young age was definitely detrimental to her kids. Although Eva allegedly throws herself under a train to collect insurance money for them, and at another time practically kills herself trying to save Hannah from burning to death, her love for her children is never overtly expressed/articulated.

Hannah questions her about this because it is obviously something that troubles her. Her response: "You

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settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you?..You snake-eyed ungrateful hussy..I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?" (p.68-9,1923). Just like Eva's missing leg that no one inquires about, it is a family 'rule' not to speak about personal or emotionally charged issues. This makes all members of the Peace family (and boarding house) have to deal with traumatic issues completely alone.

During this conversation, Hannah also asks Eva why she killed Plum. Hannah and her child, Sula's, experiencing this will definitely impact their lives. Evidence of this impact can be seen by the way that Hannah sleeps with all of the town's men without any sort of attachment. This type of 'casual attachment' is then reflected in *Sula's* subsequent relationships with men. She too sleeps with married men (including her own best friend's) because it simply "fills an (empty) space" at the time (p.144, 1940), just as Eva's killing Plum conveniently made her feel better at the time. Despite how hurtful/devastating it was to Hannah that she could not feel or understand her own mother's love of her because of its silent expression and her frequent and intense verbal abuse, Hannah still fails to provide a secure attachment and sense of connection with her own child, Sula. Sula overhears her mother telling her two friends that childrearing was, "a pain. Wish I'd listened to mamma. She told me not to have 'em too soon. Any time at all is too soon for me..I just don't like her" (p.56-7, 1922), and Sula is moved to tears. This memory will remain etched in her mind forever. Sula can depend on no one but herself for her self-definition and fun in life. She is not considerate of or emotionally attached to anyone but her own needs.

Hannah is generally a neglectful mother, as she is unaware of (or at least unprotecting of her) because she does not remedy or shield her and her best friend Nel away from some white Irish boys who constantly threaten their existence. Because Nel is passive and very consistent in her behavior, Sula feels a need to compensate. She becomes very independent-minded and unpredictable. She almost acts as Nel's mother in cutting off part of her own finger to save them from the verbally and physically abusive Irish boys.

Nel is a wonderful source of social support for Sula. Together "they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on" (p52, 1922). This is an especially important protective factor in these girls' lives because both of their mothers were

not there enough for their daughters emotionally or physically because each had their own ‘issues,’ if you will, with their own mothers and from their own histories/developmental trajectories. Hannah, for five years of her life witnessed her father's alcoholism, womanizing habits, and severe abuse of his wife (her mother). Additionally, both Sula and Nels’ fathers were essentially completely missing from their lives. Sula’s father died when she was just three, and Nel’s father was rarely home because of the nature of his job. Sula had no siblings that she could turn to for guidance and support, and Nel was also an only child. Lastly, Sula’s aunt had her own children that she was most likely preoccupied with, while her uncle Plum was severely malnourished as a result of his drug addiction as a response to being involved in WWI combat (probably brought on by a genetic susceptibility/risk factor--his own father’s substance abuse). But Nel is a godsend for another, perhaps even *more* important reason.

Nel is the emotional complement of Sula. They purport to be mystically tied to one another’s thoughts and feelings and situations. Nel’s house is obsessively orderly, Sula’s is chaotic. Nel’s mother is “custard” colored, and Sula’s is “sooty,” while Nel is lighter colored and Sula is darker skinned (1920). By this fused attachment, I also mean that whatever the one feels and does, the other is polar opposite. When Nel and Sula accidentally kill Little Chicken, Sula cries hysterically but feels no guilt. Nel on the other hand, feels extremely guilty, but acts rationally and immediately inquires whether or not Shadrack witnessed the event. “Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes” (p53, 1922). Here we begin to see emerge Sula’s externalizing behaviors and Nel’s internalizing behaviors. While Sula deals with racial and gender discrimination by breaking the unspoken traditions/mores of the community and becoming her own individual, Nel’s emotional protection resides in her conforming to the way that her grandmother has raised her and trying to do everything in her power to retain the community’s respect.

Nel’s mother is a whore and her grandmother who raises her is very authoritative and is eager to please everyone. Outside visual appearance/persona of order is of utmost importance to her. (EX: her orderly home, religious practices, smiling at the abusive and racist train conductor.) Nel vows to herself as a child that she will remain true to the “me-ness” that she discovers when riding back from Cecile’s

funeral, “Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (p.28, 1920). Despite this vow, she can’t break away from the standards and lifestyle of her family.

Nel’s reunion with the community’s conventionality begins with her marrying Jude because “*he* picked *her*,” (she did not do the choosing, p.82, 1927) and because getting married, raising children, and not obtaining higher education is the respected norm of her immediate community. Nel gives up her own dreams by adopting her community’s and mothers. She does this despite the strong negative impressions she got having to watch her mother urinate in a field, dealing with segregation on the bus, and coping with her mother’s own shame at her mother’s life of prostitution and messiness. The power and joy that Nel derives from Sula also disappears with Sula when she leaves the Bottom for college. Sula and Jude’s independent personalities, when fused with her timid identity, make Nel one whole significant person. Without either, she is depressed because she feels that she is no one (1937).

Sula on the other hand, goes to college and sees Ajax regularly only because he is like her, comfortable rebelling against public opinion (he even goes to jail when visiting Tar Baby there). The community not only ostracizes her, but also uses her as a reference point for what the absolute worst person in the world can look like. The women of the town do this for quite a few reasons. Firstly, the community is very tight-knit because it gains its identity, or defines itself *through* her. In a world that is unfair and unpredictable, the citizens of the town like to feel as though they can exert some control over their lives and what is to occur within it. Eva knows exactly where her hairbrush is all of the time, Helene’s home is immaculate, Shadrack founds ‘National Suicide Day’ and tells Sula, “Always” to assure her of her permanency (1941), et cetera.

The community embraces Eva because she is powerful. Moreover, she helps the community’s helpless. Therefore, it doesn’t really matter that she ‘may have’ killed her son or renamed someone else’s children (the Deweys). The people in the community gossip about her periodically, but her matriarchal demeanor commands respect. Similarly, even though Hannah sleeps with the women’s husbands, she too isn’t a threat to the community because at least her behavior is predictable. They absorb this as part of their everyday life, just as they assimilated (or came to accept) National Suicide Day.

Sula on the other hand, is unpredictable and unacceptable. Her very own grandmother attributes the strange weather, the burning of Hannah, and the five omens as due to Sula's return to the community! The fact that Sula, "watches as Hannah is consumed by flames," is viewed as extremely disturbing by the community -- they do not consider the possibility that it might simply be the reaction of a curious and perhaps horror stricken child! Sula demolishes order. She sleeps with Caucasian men -- this is an insult to their African-American culture and heritage. Women and men in the community cannot view this as a *personal preference*. With each change in appearance of her birthmark, so does Sula's attitude. This threat of lack of order in their lives is more threatening than anything she actually does.

The town's people try and do the opposite of Sula, almost trying to make her feel bad or 'show her' what a good female black citizen is 'supposed' to be like, only because Sula is the antithesis of their own dreadful lives of resignation. Even though Sula is economically disadvantaged, she still manages to leave the Bottom. They also hate that she is still physically attractive (unlike those whose "wide hips (corresponded to) their narrow lives" (p.121, 1939) and that she put her grandmother in a nursing home instead of caretaking for her personally. Yet, when Sula dies the psychological identity of the community suffers as a result. "The tension was gone and so was the reason for the efforts they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair..." (p.153, 1941). Morrison starts and ends the novel with the description of a community that wondered what it itself was "all about." Sula helped to define this for them, and with her gone, the Bottom area which is to become metropolitan will never again contain the vibrance and close-knit identity as it once did as a community that both ostracized and defined itself through Sula.

While Sula's behavior is so extraordinary, she does not have a conduct disorder as many people in her community might diagnose her as having (had they had a DSM-IV to refer to). Sula's self-mutilatory, disturbing, and impulsive behaviors were definitely odd, but they were how she had to react if she was to transcend her low SES and status as a black female in the early 1900's. Cognitive theorists might assert that Sula might have had an optimistic explanatory style which allowed her to view the negative situations in her life as only transitory and not the result of her personally, but only circumstantial and circumscribed. "Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got

me..My lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's..A secondhand lonely" (p.143, 1940).

Regardless, Sula is still abnormally aggressive -- many would most likely agree that threatening to douse one's grandmother with kerosene while she sleeps is not effective or appropriate communication with a family member. But perhaps examining Sula's reasoning/thought processes and actions *in context* of the community around her with some psychological theories might led some insight into whether or not this behavior is normal or evidence of psychopathology.

"Approximately 40-60% of all children raised in woman-abusing families are at higher risk for psychopathology..and both internalizing and externalizing behavior" (Graham-Bermann & Hughes, 1998, p.3). *But*, according to social learning theory, Sula is just acting impulsively (externalizing behavior) because "children from violent families *learn* aggression tactics" (Patterson, Dishion, & Bank, 1984, p. 4). Sula witnessed her father's abuse of her mother while they were married for the first five years of her life! So, as a child Sula tried to "manipulate, to cajole, and to coerce others to have her needs met" (Graham-Bermann & Hughes, 1998, p. 5). Sula had to chop off her finger and threaten the Irish boys to coerce them to leave her and Nel alone. Sula fought with her grandmother because she saw her be abusive to her own son and daughters. Sula was simply trying out in her life what she had witnessed through direct modeling. There was nothing wrong with what she was doing in her mind -- she was simply imitating what everyone else around her was doing.

Not only does Sula imitate the aggressive behaviors of Hannah and Eva, she also copies the manner in which they express their sexuality. "It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters..The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers..." (p.41, 1921). Sula copies their sexual behavior, right down to her preference about where to make love, and how physical connection should not be equated with mental or emotional connection to one's partner or his marital status:

Hannah "rubben no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was..She would..seldom use..her bedroom, not because Sula slept in the room with her, but because her mate's tendency ..to fall asleep afterward" (p43, 1921).

Sula sleeps with men simply because it is what she wants at the time. She does not define herself through them; the female role models in her life view them as objects to be hated! For Eva, "hating BoyBoy she

could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities...hating him..kept her alive and happy” (p.36-7, 1921). And why shouldn't Sula model herself after these women? Eva commanded respect in this way, and it also made her mother be a very confident woman -- one who did not have to have emotional attachments to make herself feel good once her husband died.

Social-Cognition theorists would posit that Sula's peculiar behavior was due to cognitive sharpening, which occurs when the individual takes information in quickly and adopts a vigilant stance, again in the service of self-protection. Sula may have interpreted some social situations as more threatening than they were in reality, but she *did* have sufficient reason to. How safe would you feel if you were living in a home in which your grandmother doused her own son in gasoline and burnt him?! How secure would you feel about the level of care for you when you overhear your own mother saying she wished you never were born?! Moreover, there is abuse and racial discrimination all around Sula's immediate family. Shadrack acts obscenely when he is (constantly) drunk, Teapot is mercilessly beaten, her uncle is always high, and they can't even go to the bathroom in normal facilities. Each of these aforementioned incidents are “risk factors” for subsequent development of a disorder.

The lack of communication in the Peace family is almost as devastating as the verbal and physical abuse that Sula witnesses starting at a very young age. “Interpretations of violence and maltreatment, and available coping abilities and resources (will) counteract stress and inadequate caregiving (Wolfe & Jaffe, 1991 in Mash & Barkey, 1996, p. 522). Too frequently, Sula is left alone in trying to derive meaning and understanding about confusing situations around her. Why does Hannah sleep with so many men? Why isn't she more discrete? What is sex anyway? What is death? What will happen to Chicken Little now that he is gone? Will he come back and will anyone find out that me and Nel did it? Why do I have to be separated from White people? What are these changes occurring to my body as I grow? These are all questions that I imagine Sula has had to answer *for* herself, and *by* her self because she cannot communicate freely with her family. Trauma theory hold that:

“The way a child copes with exposure to a traumatic event (and all of these aforementioned questions are mini-traumas in the mind of a young child with no one older to turn to)..and the

immediate response of the caretakers influences the degree of trauma which the child may experience” (Pynoos, Sorenson, & Steinberg, 1993, p. 11).

Sula *should* have someone other than Nel to help normalize her reactions and concerns about her life and her experiences as a young, black female in the 1900s.

With regards to other psychopathology in the novel, some might argue that Nel experiences a major depressive episode when she sees that her husband and best friend have been unfaithful to her. After this occurs, Nel feels as though she is left with “no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” (p.111, 1937). About twenty-five years after Sula’s death, Nel can finally weep again when she realizes how much time she could have donated to her self-exploration, friendship with Sula, and general happiness, “All that time, I thought I was missing Jude... O Lord” (p.174, 1965).

So how is it then that Sula and Nel aren’t to be labeled with disorders and aren’t maladjusted? Each has different protective factors, and each is resilient despite their “risk factors” of trauma, racial and gender discrimination, verbal and physical abuse. Shadrack deals with his post-traumatic stress from WWI with alcohol and self-isolation. Plum uses drugs. The Deweys are insecurely attached to one another and don’t reach normal mental or physical growth levels for their respective ages because they are treated as one and the same (hence resulting in their Failure to thrive). Nel might be described as a “resilient overcontroller” while Sula might be described as a “resilient undercontroller” due to their calm and energetic responses to stress (respectively) (Masten & Coatsworth, Chp. 20, p.718). But as argued previously, these responses were effective because together their two parts formed a balanced and unified ‘whole.’

Nel and Sula have one another to share many of their traumatic experiences, and I would hate to imagine how they would have developed without one another to lean on for emotional support. Together, they could reach a necessary level of perceived competence and self-efficacy in their worlds -- for Nel, this was by complying with her family’s and community’s traditions. For Sula, this occurs by her separating herself from them so that she could focus on herself and her needs as a person. In a sense, this was the same thing that all of the females in the Peace family did, only her case, Sula is more modern than her time. Sula also could have achieved this self-affirmation by going to college, traveling, choosing

the men she was to date, and by having to rely on absolutely no one. “Adolescents evaluate their competence along several dimensions, including romantic appeal, close friendships, and job competence...global sense of self-worth” (Masten & Coatsworth, Chp.20, p.718). If Sula had a different means through which she could express her individuality, perhaps she might have not been as disturbing to her community, but, she did not and she therefore expressed herself in any way that she saw fit -- anything it took to keep her from turning to substance abuse, criminal behavior, or serious depression.

“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 restlessness 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, 1939).

Sula appears to be very well adjusted and healthy despite her low SES, family background of violence, and traumatic experiences. Even at the time of her death, she seems to be very satisfied with her life and her choices. She even helps Nel to realize how she might have lived her life differently. If I had had the opportunity to help Sula through therapy, I would incorporate techniques from several of the theories of abuse/violence. Interventions based on social learning theory would require that Sula’s family members or “role models” come into therapy along with her since the problems in her behavior to some extent lie at the intersection of their grand/parent-child relationships. I doubt that they would be willing to do this given their unwillingness to engage in free and open (nonabusive) conversations, so I would work with Sula to change her repertoire of conflict solving tactics so that she could “unlearn maladaptive” behavioral skills which are detrimental to her health and others around her (Patterson, 1982, p.6).

I believe that a family systems intervention in which I could show Sula’s time line genogram to her would be very effective at showing her how what she has come to understand about relationships and discipline has been passed down to her intergenerationally. This type of therapy would also be especially helpful to Nel in helping her realize how her overcontrolled responses to stress have resulted in her suppression of finding the “me-ness” that she was so adamant about discovering as a child. This would prove essential in helping her to be a better single-mother to her three children. This way she could avoid being so authoritarian and overcontrolling as her parental figure was. (I would start by having her go to sleep in her *own* bed without her children!)

Obviously, in my intake interview I would try and gather as much data on Sula as I could. Especially with regards to African-American culture and its importance/ relevance to her. Unfortunately, despite Sula's resilience to domestic violence and death, segregation and racial discrimination were also devastating factors in the town people's lives. Even if they all had had the "perfect" home lives and multiple sources of emotional and physical support, the entire culture was undermined by the knowledge that the "White" world viewed them as inferior, and even animalistic beings. They are segregated, the persons who fought in war aren't viewed as heroes (Shadrack and Plum), and they aren't offered the same employment opportunities (Jude isn't hired to help build the railroad) as other nationalities are. I would have to learn more about Sula's culture: about segregation, WWI, the importance of omens and superstitions and what they consist of, to name a few.

The type and duration of therapy would vary greatly, depending on the age at which Sula would start therapy and how willing her family would be to accompany her. Obviously, providing factual information about certain life events (trauma theory) and normalizing fears and reactions would be irrelevant if Sula was already an adult (e.g. what happens when people die, what sex is, etc.) I *do* think that at any age however, Sula could definitely benefit from a strong and supportive therapeutic alliance in which I would provide her with numbers of different social services, health care facilities, and work with her towards building further (strengthening) her already great sense of self. I might encourage her to find work in an area which she found interesting in college. I would also slowly work with her to realize that people can not be pushed aside when they are inconvenient (e.g. like her grandmother) and to see how interactions with others can go more smoothly if one is not so confrontational. Lastly, I would help Sula to understand that not all partners are like Ajax, and that some people like to have you need them: one can still be 'strong' as an individual and have strong emotional attachments to other people. Because Sula is such a strong-minded and open individual, I feel that she would work well with me in an attempt to make her life even more happy and more full. With unconditional positive regard and some gentle suggestion, I think Sula would have a wonderful prognosis!

* Quotes are written as (page #, Year of occurrence/title of chapter) to avoid any confusion that may be due to different editions of the novel. All citations taken from Graham-Bermann & Hughes' 1998 article have a page number following them.

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