Sula: Crash Course Literature #309

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=eAHYT5gIPZg
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/eAHYT5gIPZg

Hi. I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today, we're talking about Toni Morrison's novel Sula. Sula is a story about the power and peril of friendship in adolescence, but it's also a fascinating study of how places and families make us up.

Morrison's slim novel explores many of our biggest questions. Are we fated to a certain life by race and class and gender and upbringing? Is human life better when we honor the conventions of our social order, or should we defy them? And how can good and evil truly be opposites when they so often resemble each other?

You probably don't read Sula in your high school English classes, but you should. God knows it's better than Lord of the Flies.

[Theme Music]

Stan, I know I need to let it go, but I'm still mad at you for making me make a video about Lord of the Flies. Right, but about Sula. So, the novel opens with a description of a mostly African American neighborhood situated above the fictional city of Medallion, Ohio: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom."

So, Sula is a eulogy for this place of nightshade and blackberry – plants that it's easy to associate with black rootedness, which has been torn out to build a golf course. But nightshade and blackberry serve other metaphorical functions, too. Like, in an essay called "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison explains that nightshade is an "unusual" plant that produces "toxic" berries. While Blackberry is a "common" plant that produces "nourishing" fruit. So we see the nourishing and the poisonous situated together immediately in the novel, as well as the common and the rare. And we're told that both thrived there together, in that place when it was a neighborhood.

So, this is an internally diverse, multidimensional community – and Morrison refuses to portray it, or her characters, as simply one thing or another. We also learn in Sula's opening pages about the fraught history of the name, the "Bottom." The story goes like this: A farmer promises a slave freedom and land at the bottom of the valley if he completes a bunch of difficult chores.

The slave manages to finish the tasks, and then the farmer gives him rocky land in the hills. The farmer justifies this treachery with a turn of phrase, saying: "when God looks down, it's the bottom […] the bottom of heaven – best land there is." So this is a world in which the bottom is not necessarily under the top, which, for one thing, undermines a tendency to privilege whiteness as above blackness. But this is also one way among many that Sula encourages its readers to reconsider assumptions that emerge from binary thinking. Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So, Binary thinking, or distinguishing between opposing items like hot OR cold, light OR dark, good OR evil, is deeply embedded in Western philosophy. In the structuralist literary theory proposed by people like Ferdinand de Saussure, binary oppositions give units of language their meaning, because each unit becomes defined by its complementary relationship with another term. Like, you know goodness by knowing evil; you know hot by knowing cold; etc.

But there are big problems with binary thinking, especially when it comes to language, because one term tends to dominate, or at least become culturally privileged over, the other. The post-structuralist Jacques Derrida, for instance, considered binary thinking to be "a violent hierarchy" where "one of two terms governs the other." Like, in Western thought, the concept of light tends to dominate the concept of dark. Light is associated with knowledge and truth and revelation; darkness with evil, ignorance, and confusion.

And when that sort of binary thinking gets projected onto race, the consequences are disastrous. And it happens with gender as well. We tend to view gender as binary, even though it isn't, any more than race is. But we often define femaleness in the context of maleness. If we think men should be strong, aggressive, leaders, then binary thinking can lead us to conclude that women should be weak, timid followers.

By inverting "bottom" over top, by valuing both the nightshade and the blackberry, and by presenting both the main female characters in the novel without judgement, Morrison encourages the reader to reconsider undervalued identities, and to set aside the false binaries that truly can make language a tool of oppression.

Thanks Thought Bubble. So, while I consider Sula to be an elegantly crafted refutation of binary thinking, Morrison later found flaws in the book's design. In 1973, when Morrison published Sula, she felt that she needed to create a "threshold" through which the reader could enter the text.

So she opened the novel from the perspective of a "valley man," that is, a white male farmer. And Morrison later wrote that she found the accommodation of what she called an "outside-the-circle" gaze "embarrassing." Morrison later wrote in Unspeakable Things Unspoken, "The stage-setting of the first four pages is embarrassing to me now, but the pains I have taken to explain it may be helpful in identifying the strategies one can be forced to resort to in trying to accommodate the mere fact of writing about, for and out of black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream 'white' culture. The 'valley man's' guidance into the territory was my compromise. Perhaps it 'worked,' but it was not the work I wanted to do."

But Sula quickly pivots away from the valley man to focus on the beautifully wrought friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace. Nel is a quiet girl, raised by her imperious mother, Helene Wright. As the narrator explains, "Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground." But Nel eventually discovers the power of independence.

In one of my favorite passages from the novel, she thinks, " 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me.' Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like a power, like joy, like fear... 'Me,' she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, 'I want... I want to be... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful.' "

Nel connects being "wonderful" with her friend Sula, who was raised in very different circumstances. Sula was raised in her grandmother's house slash boarding house, a "...wooly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left out for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream."

Sula's mother, Hannah, also lives in the house. And Hannah regards sex as "pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable." She has sex with boarders and her friends' husbands purely for pleasure. So, Sula has been raised outside the

conventions of the social order, and she seems almost magically free to Nel, whose upbringing was all about becoming “obedient” and “polite.”

And as an adult, Sula continues to be wonderful. She travels, she takes on lovers, she refuses to sacrifice herself to anyone. But she also sleeps with Nel’s husband. Which for her, is part of not making sacrifices. We might think of Sula as the novel’s nightshade, “unusual” and compelling, but also at times “toxic.”

By contrast, Nel follows the more socially sanctioned path of marrying and raising children. So we might think of Nel as the novel’s blackberry, “common” and “nourishing.” Except no! Because this is a novel that exposes the limitations of binary thinking, and we're made to see throughout the novel how these opposites in many ways aren’t. Like, let’s look at the internal differences within each of these characters.

Consider how each reacts to the great traumatic moment of their childhood. The girls are playing together in the grass on a river bank, and a little boy called Chicken Little appears in the trees. The girls tease him and playfully swing him in circles. But then Sula loses her grip on Chicken Little, and he falls into the water. “The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank. The pressure of his hard and tight little fingers was still in Sula’s palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water.”

The girls don’t tell anyone about their role in the drowning. At Chicken Little’s funeral, they, “...held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter and the press of fingers in the palm would stay above ground forever.” Nel is proud of her self-control that day, but later, she realizes that “what she had thought was maturity, serenity, and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation.” Nel had been excited and intrigued by the death – and that’s much more the stuff of nightshade than blackberry.

And Sula is equally complex. Although she commits her unwilling grandmother to an institution, has multiple affairs with married men, including Nel’s husband, we're told that she secretly craves the “common” pleasures of a “nourishing” love. And as a child, Sula enjoys sitting in Nel’s formal living room for hours, which is as close as she can get to a normal life.

And as an adult, she falls in love with a man named Ajax, and discovers “what possession was,” and loses her mental and physical health when Ajax leaves. These desires for stability, of a life inside the social order are much more the stuff of blackberry then nightshade. And although they have very different lives, and make very different choices, Nel and Sula are alike in such deep profound ways that at times there doesn’t seem to be a boundary between them.

When the adult Sula returns to the “Bottom” after ten years, Nel thinks: “It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home. Sula. Who made her laugh who made her see old things with new eyes, in whose presence she felt clever, gentle and a little raunchy. Sula, whose past she had lived through and with whom the present was a constant sharing of perceptions. Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself.”

In the foreword to the 2002 edition of Sula, Morrison explains that she had been motivated by the following questions while writing the book:

- What is friendship between women when unmediated by men?
- What choices are available to black women outside their own society’s approval?
- What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community?

Sula often considers “female freedom” in terms of sexual freedom, but the idea of freedom takes many forms throughout the novel. For Sula, freedom is defined by her “resistance to either sacrifice or accommodation.” But, of course, much is lost in the name of never sacrificing or accommodating – not least the damage done to the central friendship of both women’s lives when Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband. But then again, much is lost in Nel’s accommodation to the social order. I mean, if you are looking for simple answers on how best to lead a good life, look elsewhere.

We've all imagined what it would be like to have a wonderful life. What if I don’t go to college or get a job or get married or acquire kids and a house? But Sula reminds us that there are losses and gains in any choice, and that the binary of the extraordinary life and the ordinary one is treacherous and profoundly false. And this is even more profoundly true for people living within systems of oppression.

Morrison later wrote of Sula, “Hanna, Nel, Eva, Sula were points of a cross – each one a choice for characters bound by gender and race.” In the end, she wrote, “...the only possible triumph was that of the imagination.” So, what might a triumph of the imagination look like? Well, we can see it in Nel and Sula’s enduring connection – the intensity of their friendship, the violence of their betrayals, and the power of their mutual recognition.

Sula eulogizes a community in which African Americans bonded together to withstand economic, social, and psychological hardships. But it’s hardly an idealized community. There’s violence within it, as well as scapegoating. Places are not merely good or merely bad any more than people are.

Morrison’s characters, like her places, are troubled and triumphant, weak and strong, joyful and heartbreaking, but they’re never just one thing or the other. And what makes Sula a masterpiece is its refusal to give in to the seductions of simplification. Instead, it depicts the complexities and richness of human connection. Thanks for watching. I’ll see you next time.

Crash Course is filmed here in Indianapolis at the Chad and Stacy Emigholz Studio, and it's made with the help of all of these nice people, and it's possible because of your support at Patreon.

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This is the last of our Literature miniseries, by the way. Coming up next: Human Geography is way more fascinating than you might think. Thanks again for watching, and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.