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Sula through Foucault's, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth Of The Prison*

Toni Morrison's, *Sula* focuses on societal hierarchies and how they clash with individuals who refuse to comply with the rules that have been established. The book's protagonist, Sula, battles this conflict throughout her entire life, living in a world ritualized by customs that she has no desire to adhere to. Michel Foucault's, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth Of The Prion* is a compliment to this novel, focusing on the societal norms that dictate the conduct of the world, specifically the type of world that Sula lives in. Through Foucault's theory, it is easy to infer that Sula's existence is deemed unacceptable but it is her existence that serves as a stabilizer for her town, Bottom. By disproving of Sula so strongly as a community, Bottom is able to use Sula as a metric to establish its moral code, which results in a norm that is devastatingly shattered when Sula reaches her tragic, yet celebrated demise.

One of the main reasons that Sula is disapproved of so strongly is her views on sex. When the Narrator describes these views, they write, "She went to bed with men as frequently as she could. It was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow... She thought she liked the sootiness of sex and its comedy... and (she) rejected those lovers who regarded sex as healthy or beautiful." (Morrison, 122). When the narrator discusses Sula's exploration for misery and sorrow, it shows that Sula does not value sex as an act that needs to be intimate. This opposition of Sula's symbolizes just how different she is from the people that live in her town, which makes her a threat to families because adulterous sex does not faze her. This problem then results in a conflict of values between her and the other

women who live in Bottom, fearful that Sula will use their husbands for meaningless sex, which is all that she is looking for, which is why she rejects those who view sex as this pristine act. Because Sula embraces this rather wild image, the married women in town do not understand her because it is not what they have been taught. This results in them disapproving of Sula because they do not know what else to think.

This conflict in the novel only escalates when Sula sleeps with her best friend's husband, Jude. When her best friend, Nel, accuses Sula of taking her husband away as a result of the affair, Sula responds by saying, "What you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" (145). Although both women see it as a turning point in their relationship, they both have valid reasons to be upset. Nel, who has evolved into being a traditional woman from Bottom, is angry that Sula would betray her in such a fashion. A betrayal that resulted in the departure of Jude, which then broke up her family. Sula sees it as a betrayal on Nel's part, believing that what she did was meaningless and that Nel should not have let it ruin their friendship. The reason why this relationship ended in such a tragic way is because Sula and Nel grew up together, identifying themselves as one person. As they drifted apart, so did their identities and perspectives. So because both women view sex differently, it created a communication barrier, resulting in Nel joining the rest of Bottom in disapproving of Sula.

Foucault's, "Delinquent Theory" further proves Sula to be this man made outsider that Bottom collectively creates. He describes the theory, writing, "The delinquent is an institutional product... by means of ever more closely placed insertions, under ever more insistent surveillance, by an accumulation of disciplinary coercion." (Foucault, 1496). When applying this

theory to the novel, it can be seen that Sula is not actually this wicked, evil person that she is perceived of being. Instead, she is socially constructed as an evil being because her beliefs and actions do not align with Bottom's. So as the word began to spread on Sula, the members of Bottom were forced to believe what they had heard, because they had no way to avoid being victimized by this coercion of discipline that was established. When it comes to Nel, it is Sula's death that forces her to realize how much she actually loved this woman and that it was Sula and not Jude, who she had missed all those years prior. The tears that Nel cries symbolize the grief that she feels for giving into this fear that it would be socially unacceptable for her to remain friends with Sula, which goes back to Foucault's idea, that an environment is a product of one's society and therefore, it has the authority to label who is evil.

By labeling Sula as evil, Bottom is able to normalize the disapproval of her. This is proven when the Narrator writes,

“Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways... They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst... The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, (and) triumphed over.” (117-118).

This passage exemplifies the moral code that the people of Bottom live under. By living in Bottom and acting in the free spirited way that she does, Sula is able to inspire the community to act as productive human beings who use her as a symbol of what they never want to become, and as a way to communitize. The Narrator's use of the word, “survived”, makes it clear that perceiving Sula as this evil being allows Bottom to normalize this hatred of her, a hatred that needs to be faced head on and beaten. Instead of forcing Sula out of town, these people need her

to be a member of Bottom because she gives them something to strive off of, as if hating her regulates their society.

As abnormal as it may seem, Bottom's decision to normalize the hatred of Sula is not as uncommon as one may think. Foucault explores ideas of judging and surveillance in his theory, writing, "The judges of normality are present everywhere... with its systems of insertion, distribution, (and) surveillance, observation has been the greatest support, in modern society, of the normalizing of power." (1499). When applying this idea to the novel, it is important to understand what exactly it is, that needs to be supported. Because the people who live in Bottom were able to see how different Sula is from them, they are able to identify her as a threat that can ruin the lives that they so greatly appreciate, only realizing this with her arrival. By judging Sula and acting in a manner that attempts to be better than her, Bottom is motivated to keep societal norms the way that they are, so Sula cannot win. In their eyes, letting her win would be letting her beliefs spread throughout the rest of the community, a community that is supported off of a set of predetermined expectations and standards.

As mentioned previously, Sula serves as a source of stabilization for Bottom because she acts as an opposing factor, which inspires the regulation in their way of living. When Sula passes, the Narrator discusses how much it devastates the community, writing, "The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair... Now that Sula was dead and done with... They returned to their original claims of superiority." (153-154). Because Sula died, Bottom lost every reason to feel inspired, which then resulted in an eruption of chaos, a chaos that was due to people's inability to perform the caring, yet responsible tasks that bettered the town. This shows that these

tasks were only performed because the members of Bottom did not want Sula to get the best of them, as if taking care of their families and houses made them more genuine than Sula. So when she did eventually pass, nobody had any reason to act as they did prior because there was no one who was a disruption to the societal conduct in Bottom. Because of this, her death resulted in the destruction of the normalization for the people in the community, because they found it impossible to not only hate, but to also strive off of a dead woman.

Foucault's theory can further explain the impact of Sula's death when he discusses the consequences of a disruption in power. This is shown when he writes,

“... the internal dislocation of the judicial power or at least of its functioning; (creates) an increasing difficulty in judging, as if one were ashamed to pass sentence; a furious desire on the part of the judges to judge, assess, diagnose, recognize the normal and abnormal and claim the honour of curing or rehabilitating.” (1498).

When Sula died, her death began to represent the, “dislocation” of power in Bottom because the community had no one to disapprove of. It is interesting to note when Foucault mentions the shame that judges feel when passing sentence in these scenarios, because it exploits this obsessive need to have an established chain of command. In the case of Bottom, how could the community pass judgement on one another when they all act alike? It is their similarities that have brought them all together and because of this, disapproving of a community member would only be an act of hypocrisy. Due to this, there is no one to, “judge”, and there is no one to, “diagnose”, which results in the destruction of authoritative power, which ultimately kills the efficient production of Bottom, because nobody has any reason to care anymore.

When studying, *Sula*, it is important to understand what Morrison was trying to convey by writing it. It is a character like Sula, that gives readers a glimpse into the life of an outsider, which shows that they possess all the feelings and struggles that everyone else deals with. This book also depicts how a society's operational system can be flawed, which detests people who do not fit into the visions set, by authoritative judges. With the assistance of Foucault, it is easier to further examine themes of societal power that affect all the characters in the novel, specifically Sula and Nel. Foucault's theory helps reveal that Sula's existence is absolutely needed, in order to maintain the power and consistency for the members of Bottom to function properly.

Works Cited

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