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A World of Blurred Boundaries: Deconstructing Binary Oppositions in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973)

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Abstract :

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) blurs the boundaries between white/black, good/evil, and presence/absence. This paper offers a deconstructive reading of this novel, seeking to explore how it challenges the rigidity of this either/or logic that characterizes Western thinking. Derridean concepts like presence/absence, trace, and pharmakon, are used to demonstrate how Morrison deconstructs essentialist views of morality, race and even motherhood. The protagonist, Sula, is read as a trace, representing the absence of morality and also a necessary presence for the community's moral self-definition. She is a pharmakon that both threatens and cures the community. Thus, this study shows how Derrida's theory can shed light on the novel's ontological and ethical ambiguities that challenge dominant narratives about identity and morality.

Key words: Binary oppositions; deconstruction ; presence; trace ; morality

الملخص:

تقوم رواية توني موريسون سولا بطمس الحدود بين الأبيض والأسود، الخير والشر، والحضور والغياب. يقدم هذا البحث قراءة تفكيكية للرواية من أجل استكشاف كيف تتحدى صلابة منطق أيا/أو الذي يميز الفكر الغربي. بالاستناد على مفاهيم دريدا مثل الحضور/الغياب، الأثر، والفارماكون، يهدف البحث إلى إظهار كيف تقوم موريسون بتفكيك التصورات الجوهرية للأخلاق، العرق، وحتى الأمومة. شخصية سولا تقرأ كأثر حيث تمثل غياب الأخلاق ولكنها في نفس الوقت حضور ضروري لتعريف المجتمع لذاته الأخلاقية. هي أيضا فارماكون تهدم المجتمع وتشفيه في الوقت ذاته. وبذلك يظهر هذا البحث كيف تسلط نظرية دريدا الضوء على الالتباسات الأوتولوجية والأخلاقية في الرواية والتي عن طريقها تتحدى السرديات السائدة عن الهوية والأخلاق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثنائيات المتقابلة؛ التفكيك؛ الحضور؛ الأثر؛ الأخلاق



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1. Introduction

Set in a racially segregated Bottom community where moral, racial, and gender boundaries collapse, Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) invites readers into a world where morality, identity, and belonging are anything but simple. The novel depicts the lives of black women whose lives are shaped by social expectations, personal transgression, and ethical judgment. Rather than respecting conventional moral structure, *Sula* highlights the bigger questions of race, patriarchy, class and self-identity that shape the lives of its female characters. The novel serves as a compelling example of unresolved binaries such as good/evil, black/white, male/female, bottom/top, individual/community, right/wrong, presence/absence, Helen/Eva, and Sula/Nel. The narrative is built upon paradox and ambiguity, resulting from the constant confusion of these categories. Creating a female protagonist that defies normative gendered and racial roles as well as easy moral classification, Morrison seeks to portray "a very old worn-out idea, which has to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms" (1977, p. 215). She calls for a reexamination of established notions of morality and recognition of their complexities. The novel, thus, is a fertile ground for a deconstructive reading that probes the binary logics that characterize Western thought and literary tradition.

Undertaking a deconstructive analysis, this paper focuses on the ways in which Morrison's novel disrupts binary oppositions and resists the rigidity of signification and characterization. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's ideas about language and meaning, mainly the concepts of the metaphysics of presence and absence, trace, and pharmakon, it is demonstrated how Morrison builds a world where the categories we use to make sense of the world constantly shift in order to reveal their constructed and contingent nature. Deconstruction is based on the idea that there is no "absolute goodness or absolute evil" and that "the two concepts can be substituted" (Mousavilar&Pourmahmoud, 2022, p. 18). Through its protagonist, Morrison deconstructs the familiar binaries of white/black, good/evil, and male/female and offers a more fluid, unsettling, but more honest view of identity, morality, and community.

2. Derrida, Binary Oppositions, and the Metaphysics of Presence

Derrida's theory of deconstruction fundamentally challenges the Western Manichean thinking that divides the world and human experience into fixed binary



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oppositions like good/evil, male/female, white/black, self/other, and presence/absence. Exploring the nature of Western metaphysics, Derrida argues that these binaries reinforce dominant cultural narratives because they are implicitly built according to a hierarchical system that privileges one term over the other. His theory exposes how these oppositions are constructed and unstable rather than natural and neutral, depending on exclusion and silencing to maintain their power. He considers the collapse of hierarchical oppositions and of the idea of a fixed center as the first strategy in deconstruction (1982, p. 329). Therefore, rather than accepting these categories as they are, Derrida invites us to question them and to look at what has been marginalized for the sake of reinforcing dominant meanings.

The tension between presence and absence is considered as a central concept in the theory of deconstruction. Traditional Western metaphysics, from Plato to Heidegger, is logocentric and phonocentric and has always linked truth to the idea of "presence" (i.e., what is seen and spoken), whether as "essence," "origin," or "substance" (Derrida, 1976, p.3). At the same time, it overlooked absence as secondary and irrelevant. However, Derrida blurs the line between the two, stressing that absence is both meaningful and constitutive. According to deconstruction, presence is a play of both presence and absence; hence the former cannot exist without the latter. This highlights their inseparability and undermines binary thinking (Derrida, 1978). Combining the French verbs *différer* (to differ) and *déferer* (to defer), Derrida's neologism *différance* deconstructs this metaphysical privileging of presence over absence and celebrates the multiplicity of significance. It describes the play of spatial difference and temporal deferring (postponement) that create meaning and reveals that it is never fully present and self-contained but always delayed and mediated (Derrida, 1981, pp. 8-9).

Trace is another Derridean principle that demonstrates that "presence" depends on the very absence it attempts to exclude. The trace, a term Derrida (1976) borrows from Emmanuel Levinas, is a mark of absence that disrupts the purity of presence because the latter is haunted by the absence that makes it intelligible (pp. 62). As an absence that still shapes meaning and exerts influence, the trace denies the idea of a fixed center and the logocentrism of Western metaphysics, as "we are caught up in a play of references, traces of meaning, meanings dispersed in language and deferred in time" (Cherryholes, 1988, p.38). Signs have meaning not



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inherently through direct correspondence to a thing, but though spacing ("spatial separation") and temporal deferral ("temporization") (Kakoliris, 2017, p.48). Every presence is only constituted as a trace of something else that is absent. Derrida uses the pharmakon, a term from Plato's Phaedrus, to illustrate the instability of metaphysical binaries and their reliance on "either...or" logic. Just like the trace is both present and absent, the pharmakon is both "remedy" and "poison," (Kakoliris, 2017, pp.55-56), introducing, hence, a "both/and" logic of supplementarity that resists the exclusory binary framework.

3. The Bottom on Top: A Cruel Joke Turned Home

In Morrison's *Sula*, language and power shape people's lives in ways that may appear absurd, entrapping individuals in meanings that have real consequences for them. In a true Derridean fashion and with a linguistically-built-in ambiguity, the novel starts with the "nigger joke," reminding us that words lack fixed meanings. The novel's prologue presents a world of paradox and contradictions, resisting the binary either/or logic. Morrison plays with the name of the black community's home: the "Bottom," ironically situated at the top of the hill. Although they geographically occupy the higher place and can literally look down on the whites at the valley, the black remain, figuratively, at the bottom.

This irony is itself a form of deconstruction. Exposing the gap between what is said and what is meant, it functions as a site of disruption where meaning is subverted, which mirrors Derrida's notion of *différance*. Therefore, the setting becomes a powerful deconstructive element that draws attention to the contradictions in language, social hierarchies, morality, and racial identity, challenging conventional understanding of these notions and exposing their fluidity. The joke comes from a lie a white slave-owner told a Black man, promising him freedom and a piece of "bottom land" in return for performing heavy chores. The slave is deceived by the "good" white farmer who explains that the hilly land is the best land since it is "the bottom of heaven" (p.5), claiming that it is rich and fertile when in reality, it is barren and difficult to farm. This irony challenges the logic that places black people at the "bottom" of society by situating them on higher ground.

The joke proves that words can be easily twisted to promote injustice and that lies can be perpetuated as truth for when a white character laughs at this "nigger joke," it is not about humour but about power. Under the guise of benevolence and



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good will, the “good” white farmer exercises his own supremacy over the black slave who has no power to object. Morrison subverts the traditional binary of good and evil, as in abusing his power and deceiving the black slave, the “good” white farmer is really evil. The spatial division of the setting with the black community bordering the white one emphasizes “the sharp contrast existing between the two groups” (Kpohoue, 2018, p. 25)” and shows the “mechanism of power operation” (Song, 2023, p.4). Through this linguistic confusion, the author provides a reshaping of the narrative, shifting the lower position of the black to the top and the higher position of the whites to the bottom, both geographically and morally, through a cruel joke that upholds racial inequality and highlights the harsh reality of the black community seeking survival at the bottom of society. This makes language a powerful tool of oppression, showing that meaning, in general, is flexible, unstable, and shaped by historical deception and systemic power rather than objective truth.

4. Deconstructing Motherhood

The novel’s structure is based on a pattern of binaries, particularly in how its central characters are framed. It revolves around the lives of Sula and Nel, whose personalities and destinies are shaped by two opposing households, each carrying its own distinct ethical weight. Morrison carefully traces their family lineages, not just to give insight into their behaviors but to challenge the very idea of moral absolutes and to provide a different understanding of the paradigm of good/evil and right/wrong. Rather than presenting these binaries as fixed categories, she demonstrates how each is entangled in power, control, and survival.

4.1. Helene Wright: The Tyranny of Presence

Morison carefully crafts the names of the two opposing households: Wright and Peace, embedding binary oppositions that become far more unstable than they first appear. The Wright family represents traditional respectability and conventional female morality. Even the name “Wright” reinforces this, sounding exactly the same as the word “right”, as if to suggest that this family represents the correct way of living as well as the right morality for black women.

Conforming to white societal standards, Helene Wright manipulates her husband and her daughter, Nel, to fit with those rigid expectations of rightness. She serves as an example of traditional understanding of motherhood, embodying the ideal of a good woman who strictly conforms to expected maternal duties as



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dictated by social norms. Described as “an impressive woman [...] A woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority” (p.18), Helene represents admirable social rectitude. Ironically, however, because she adheres so rigidly to societal expectation, she is fully consumed by the structures that oppress her, sacrificing her autonomy for society's approval.

This erasure of the self is manifested in Helene's obsessive control over her daughter Nel. Preparing Nel for her traditional duties as a wife and mother, she raises her to be obedient and discourages anything that might jeopardize this upbringing, driving her “imagination underground” (p.18). Helene's principles have a strong hold on Nel, who dreads the “oppressive neatness” of her home (p.29). Helene's presence in Nel's life is tyrannical because it masks emotional absence.

Helene's insistence on preparing Nel for a socially acceptable position should not be understood solely as an act of maternal guidance but as a reflection of her own deep-seated need for validation. The train scene demonstrates Helene's internalized racism. Visiting her dying mother in the South with Nel, they mistakenly enter a white-only car. When humiliated by the white conductor, Helene submits and smiles apologetically like a street dog that returns to “wag its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before” (p.21). This deeply affects Nel, marking her awareness of racial oppression and her mother's need for validation within the racial hierarchy, even at the cost of dignity.

Helene's belief that whiteness is the measure of worth aligns with Derrida's metaphysics of presence and absence. She has changed her Creole name Héléne into a more typical white name, Helene. Even her surname “Wright” rhymes with “white,” indicating that white standards are the right ones. She considers white standards of beauty as the ultimate markers of social validation, as shown in her disdain for Nel's wide and flat nose, “generous lips,” and skin that “had dusk in it” (p.18), all visible markers of black identity. She forces Nel to “pull” her nose despite the pain to “improve” her appearance (p.28). This reflects her rooted conviction that blackness signifies lack in contrast to the presence that whiteness represents. Morrison destabilizes the notion of a constructed “center” through Helene's unfulfilled existence. Her strict adherence to white norms alienates her from her authentic self and oppresses Nel, highlighting the oppressive consequences of the Western metaphysics of presence, built on conformity, erasure, and control.



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4.2. Eva Peace: Sacrificial Presence and Ambiguous Motherhood

In stark contrast to the Wright's strict guidelines, the Peace family inhabits a "household of throbbing disorder" (p.52). The women of the Peace family handle their responsibilities in non-traditional terms. They prioritize personal autonomy over social approval. Thus, contrasting Helene who has to undergo self-erasure in her pursuit for social validation, the Peace women create genuine identities that are not molded according to social standards.

The Peace's rejection of normative structures is evident in the depiction of its matriarch, Eva, who embraces a radical form of motherhood. Eva literally gives of herself to provide food for her children and ensure their survival, as opposed to Helene who feeds on her child by exercising her own need of social approval on her. Through these opposite families, Morrison investigates the complexities of identity, morality, and survival, unveiling how conformity and defiance can create different forms of alienation, hence blurring the lines between the two households, who despite their disparities, both share the experience of alienation, albeit in distinct forms.

Eva's maternal role defies conventional moral categorization. The emotional relationship between Eva and her children is marked by paradox. She must distance herself emotionally from them to perform her motherly functions, which may be perceived as characteristic of a "bad" mother. However, black women constantly "face challenges and have to renegotiate their relationships with each other, with their children, within the larger community, and within themselves" (Collins, 2000, p.176). After her husband, BoyBoy's, desertion, Eva abandons her young children and disappears for eighteen months. Then she returns with money and a missing leg, suggesting she has made a major sacrifice for financial security, losing her leg in a deliberate accident to collect insurance money, necessary for her children's survival. She finds "a way out of" a patriarchal, racist system that "denied her the means of taking proper care of her family" (Rebeiro&dos Santos, 2017, p.73). Eva is a powerful matriarch who does not rely on men to survive.

To Eva, maternal love means "to survive and give life to her children" (Yao, 2023, p.4). When her daughter, Hannah, asks her whether she has ever loved them, she replies angrily, "Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't"(p.68), demanding if she was supposed to play "rang-around-



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the-rosie” while they were “shitting worms”(p.69). Love in the eyes of Eva is pragmatic, grounded in the brutal realities of poverty and survival. The measure of good and evil to Eva is not conventional morality or social validation, but necessity, as “the criterion for judgment thus shifts from goodness to truth” (Gilligan,1982, p.83). Morally, Eva operates within this framework of commitment to painful truth and survival, as apparent her decisions which might be deemed extreme evil by others. The blurred line between good and evil are best evident in one of the most unsettling scenes in the novel: Eva’s decision to kill her drug-addict son, Plum, to end his suffering. Should we interpret it an act of pure evil or a desperate act of mercy? Morrison does not give an answer, but forces us to sit with the contradiction: a mother who loves so deeply that she destroys.

Morrison uses a poetic language to depict Plum’s death, which further blurs the boundary between violence and mercy. Plum, in his final moments, does not experience agony but a dreamlike surrender, “twilight” (p.47). He imagines himself bathed in a “wet light” that wraps around his body, carrying the “deeply attractive smell” of gasoline. He envisions “the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him,” transforming his death into something resembling “Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing” (p.47). In this moment, the divide between good and evil collapses, suggesting that love is amoral, that what appears evil is sometimes an expression of care and good will, proving, hence, that morality, like love, resists easy categorization.

Through this juxtaposition between Eva’s extreme actions and Helene’s conformity, Morrison deconstructs the pairs right/wrong, good/evil, and love/self-interest. Eva’s fire is a swift and violent act of destruction, which plays on Derrida’s pharmakon, as both a cure that liberates her son and a poison that ends his life. Contrastingly, Helene’s influence on Nel is a slow burn, gradually suffocating her spirit by shaping her into a submissive woman and suppressing her imagination, emotional freedom, and ability to define herself. This too is a form of destruction.

5. Sula vs. Nel and the Deconstruction of Morality

Like her grandmother Eva, Sula Peace is a challenge to the rigid framework of binary thinking that dictates social norms and morality, refusing to “settle for the colored woman’s lot” (Smith, 1983, p.23). In contrast to Nel, who conforms to conventional expectations Sula inherited an unconventional and ambiguous voice



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that resists easy interpretation. Her very existence within the Bottom community disturbs the dichotomy of good and evil.

Despite their complementary friendship that breaks the boundary between self and other, as Sula regards Nel "as the closest thing to both an other and a self" (p. 119), their paths reflect their opposite perspectives on social expectations. Nel's decision to marry Jude at the age of eighteen marks the beginning of her divergence from Sula who "rejects the traditional norms of feminine respectability [...] She hates to see a woman only as a wife, mother and daughter" (Arya, 2010, p. 42). Sula's rejection of prescribed gender roles defies her community's moral compass as well as the notion of a singular, fixed female identity.

The intersection of race, gender, and deconstruction can be seen when Nel visits Sula on her deathbed and tells her, "You can't act like a man. You a woman and a colored woman at that." Sula responds, "Well, ain't that the same as being a man?" (p. 142). This provides commentary on social roles, marginalization, and agency. Nel's remark reflects that she has internalized the societal restrictions imposed on her as a black woman. She sees herself as doubly marginalized (neither white nor male), so she is expected to act within certain constraints. Sula, however, is a "free spirit" (Al-Saidi & Alqarni, 2019, p. 1221) who defies boundaries. Asserting that being a "colored woman" is the same as being a man is defiance to the traditional binaries that define power and identity, "the two terms, 'woman' and 'colored,' serve to cancel each other out" (Thapa, 2021, p. 102). Morrison, thus, calls for a reconsideration of these labels, emphasizing that identity and power are not inherently linked to gender and race.

Sula constructs her own moral framework, shaped by the shocking realization that while her mother, Hannah, loves her, a natural and involuntary instinct; she does not like her, a conscious and preferential sentiment (p. 56). The resulting ambivalent and distant mother-daughter relationship is the root of all Sula's evils, such as her perplexing reaction to her mother getting burned. Sula does nothing but observe passively, seemingly out of curiosity and interest. Sula's disturbing reaction is deeply connected to her emotional detachment (Mckee, 1995, p. 12).

Sula's perception of love is flawed, understanding that even maternal love is conditioned and subjective. Therefore, rather than reacting instinctively when she sees her mother burning, (i.e., in panic and grief), she observes in a detached



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manner, as if she is testing love and loss herself. Can we really blame Sula if her emotional distance stems from her mother's lack of conventional love? Spillers (1993) highlights this ambiguity, arguing that readers cannot help but love and hate Sula at the same time because what is left instead of the corrupted absolutes are "complex, alienated, transitory gestures of a personality who has no framework of moral reference beyond or other than herself" (p.212), which marks her as an outsider in the Bottom.

Through this uncertainty, Morrison underscores the relativism of moral judgment. Sula considers herself good because she is true to herself in contrast to Nel who is not allowed to learn right and wrong on her own terms. This is revealed when she asks Nel, "'About who was good. How you know it was you?' 'I mean may be it wasn't you. May be it was me' (p.146). Sula's final words do not just challenge Nel; they challenge the reader, too. As Bergenholtz (1996) asks "Should we admire Sula's courage, her determination to be free and to 'make herself'? Or should we loathe her?" (p.80).

The carefully constructed moral contrast that frames Sula as evil and Nel as good unravels in one of the novel's most pivotal scenes: Nel's visit to Eva in the nursing home, confronting her own darkness. Eva who is old and disabled, but still sharp in perception, accuses Nel of being involved in Chicken Little's death. When Nel objects that it was Sula who did it, Eva asks her, "You. Sula. What's the difference? You watched, didn't you?" (p.168). This question is more than rhetorical; it is a profound challenge to Nel's moral identity, a revelation about her true nature rather than an accusation.

This suggests that the boundary Nel has always believed in, the one that made her feel righteous is weak. For what does it mean to be good if you stand by and do nothing when harm is done? What kind of morality is built on silence? Nel's life has been shaped by the idea that she is everything Sula is not. Sula was dangerous, selfish, and wild. Nel was careful, self-sacrificing, and respectable. Yet Eva's words force her, and us, to reconsider.

Nel starts to remember how "Sula had cried and cried" (p.170), while she remained calm, only to finally confess after all those years that she sadistically enjoyed watching Chicken Little drown, "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?" (p.170). She admits that her calm



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demeanor was only the “tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation” (p.170). It takes Nel thirty years to admit her own evil, which allows her to break free from the constraints of the rigid set of morals and the illusion of righteousness that have long confined her.

Nel and Sula are not opposites, but intertwined and interdependent mirrors. Their identities are not distinct and separate, but relational and built both in contrast and connection. Nel is not fully good just as Sula is not fully evil. Nel visits Sula’s grave and realizes she is missing Sula and not her husband. She recognizes that she is mourning the loss of Sula, the other half of her Self, the one she has kept hidden in order to maintain an illusion of goodness. Nel’s cry in this scene is described as beyond language, “It was a fine cry – loud and long – but it has no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (p.174), reflecting the extreme pain Nel suffers from as a result of losing a part of herself. In this interdependence lies the recognition that humans are more complex than the simplistic binary understanding of gender, race, and morality.

6. The Trace of Evil, Pharmakon and the Fluidity of Good and Evil

Branded as “pariah” (p.122), “roach” (p.112), “evil” (p.115), “devil” (p.117), and a “bitch” (p.112), Sula’s presence is still vital to the community, for she serves as a scapegoat whose presence, paradoxically, fosters communal cohesion. As the embodiment of Derrida’s pharmakon, Sula is both an outcast and a necessary present, an agent of destruction and catalyst for growth and cohesion in the Bottom community whose people create a clear boundary between themselves as good and Sula as the evil other. This profoundly changes the community’s dynamics, as “they had leave to protect and love one another. 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” (p. 117-118). Her presence does not destabilize the community but strengthens it, giving them reasons to unite themselves against her as a common enemy. Sula represents the absence of conventional morality and social values, and yet her presence is essential for maintaining social order and a sense of moral self-perception.

Moreover, Sula represents Derrida’s trace. Her death embodies the metaphysical tension between absence and presence, showing that absence can be even more powerful than presence. It brings about disorder in the Bottom



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community, leaving it without a force of evil against which to define itself. Without her presence, the community's cohesion is lost: the devoted mothers become negligent and indifferent, and relationships which were cherished deteriorate (p.153). Sula becomes a trace because her death does not lead to her absence, but only intensifies her presence in a symbolic way, proving that, whether dead or alive, she plays an important role to the community's existence.

7. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a novel that challenges fixed meanings and moral labels and deconstructs the binary oppositions that traditionally shape definitions of race, gender, and morality, demonstrating how they are upheld through language and social norms. Through the fragmented and contradictory Bottom community in addition to the shifting roles assigned to black womanhood, Morrison interrogates language itself as a site of power. It is in the novel's uneasy in-betweens where Morrison's critique becomes most potent. Blackness and whiteness, male and female, mother and outcast; none of these identities is stable in Morrison's novel.

The novel collapses the expectations placed upon women in a racially stratified society. Sula, in particular, refuses to be contained by traditional labels. The metaphysics of presence is consistently troubled in the novel; Sula's character functions as a trace and a pharmakon: a presence and an absence, threat and cure. Identity is also portrayed as unstable, relational, and as containing the trace of the other. Nel, at the end of the novel, confronts her own evil and recognizes her deep connection to Sula, which blurs the line between good and evil and shows the fluidity of these categories.

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