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“It Didn’t Even Hurt”: Temple Drake’s and Sula Peace’s Resurrections

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In William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Temple Drake and Sula Peace are both women who lose their innocence as well as other aspects of their identities. Temple is sexually violated, and her image as a Southern Belle is thereby destroyed. Conversely, Sula controls her sexuality. However, she encounters many tragedies, including accidentally killing Chicken Little. Both texts examine how Temple and Sula react to the traumas they endure, but one difference includes Sula's and Temple's sexual behavior. They reverse racial roles when Temple, an aristocratic white woman, is raped, and Sula, a black woman, is not. According to Mae C. King, from 1891 to 1921 during the time period in which *Sanctuary* and part of *Sula* are set, "rape of the black woman was 'as common as whistling Dixie in the South'" (16). Temple is white, but Faulkner still plays with the paradigm that associates female sexuality with blackness, creating an underworld of darkness and sin for Temple at Miss Reba's brothel. The association between female sexuality and blackness has existed since the pre-Civil War era. Morrison resists this philosophy though. Morrison's text mostly takes place between 1919 and 1941, and *Sula*, including her family—her mother, Hannah, and her grandmother, Eva—wield their sexuality like queens. They enjoy their sexual escapades, and no one forces them into submission. By creating strong female characters, specifically African-American characters, Morrison challenges Faulkner's depiction of the South wherein women are sexual objects for men to violate. It takes sexual assault and a trip through an underworld hell for Temple to find her inner strength, but Sula never loses control of her body. Nevertheless, they both experience terrifying ordeals that cause them either to regain or sustain their individual power. Despite the emotional and physical deaths they encounter, Temple and Sula emerge as new women who reign supreme.

Temple's loss of innocence occurs at the Old Frenchman place, a bootlegger establishment, where the inhabitants violate her. Temple represents the ideal Southern Belle; however, as she will learn at the Frenchman place, the body of the Southern Belle is not a sacred site (Roberts 130-1). Ruby Goodwin, the housewife at the Frenchman place and a former prostitute, disbelieves in women's sacredness and views Temple as artificial. While Temple may look like a good girl, she secretly hides the whore that writhes inside of her. Women, according to Ruby, need a man's dominance and sexual prowess, and Ruby tells Temple what will happen when she meets a real man: "If he is just man enough to call you whore, you'll say Yes Yes and you'll crawl naked in the dirt and mire for him to call you that" (Faulkner 59). Temple mutely responds to Ruby's disgraceful words, for the images that Ruby creates shock Temple. She merely tries to repeat what Ruby says: "Her mouth [was] moving as if she were saying Yes Yes Yes" (Faulkner 60). When Temple reiterates the word "yes," and neither agrees nor disagrees with Ruby, Temple quietly admits that she does not know how men act. She numbly understands, perhaps for the first time, that men disrespect women. They may worship the idea of a Southern Belle, but they do not worship her fleshly body. Temple's response relays her youth and childishness, which only angers Ruby more: "You poor little gutless fool . . . Playing at it . . . I know your sort. I've seen them. All running, but not too fast . . . And now you must come here where you're not wanted. Nobody asked you to come here. Nobody cares whether you are afraid or not. Afraid? You haven't the guts to be really afraid, anymore than you have to be in love" (Faulkner 60-1). Without the "guts to be really afraid" or "to be in love"—in Ruby's mind, the qualities that truly make a woman—Temple stands in front of Ruby as an empty temple. Her Southern Belle image—and her innocence—wilts. Without her stature, Ruby and Popeye prey upon Temple's weakness.

When Temple later recalls the night at the Frenchman place, she says how she imagined her funeral: "I had a veil on like a bride . . . and I could see all the people sitting around the coffin, saying Dont she look sweet. Dont she look sweet" (Faulkner 219). Temple dies with her virtue intact "like a bride." The funeral helps Temple reassemble her preconceived notions about her life, and it symbolizes the death that occurs at the Frenchman place. Her death is the only way to retain her purity, and she experiences a Southern Belle's funeral. The people who sit around the coffin—probably town folk, her father, and her brothers—praise her virtue when they say, "Don't she look sweet." While Temple imagines her funeral, Popeye rapes her in a corncrib, annihilating any last remnants of her innocence. Popeye then kidnaps Temple, and she will only confront more loss.

Similarly, Sula loses her girlhood innocence. Men in Sula's and her friend, Nel's, town, the Bottom, take delight in their blossoming bodies: "Nel and Sula walked through this valley of eyes chilled by the wind and heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares . . . Pig meat. The words were in all [the men's] minds. And one of them, one of the young ones, said it aloud" (Morrison 50). The words "through this valley of eyes" echo the biblical valley of the shadow of death, referring to the journey that occurs at the end of someone's life. Sula's and Nel's "valley" consists of a different journey. Through the "valley of eyes," Sula and Nel walk through their initiation as women, and consequently, the end of their girlhood. Now, their bodies evoke desire within men, and their flesh defines them, for one young man calls out "pig meat." The men's prying eyes strip their clothes and visualize their bare skin. Under these gazes, Sula and Nel exist as vulnerable as pigs for slaughter. But Sula accepts their virile glances. They fuel her longing to assert herself and defeat them. She refuses to let any man scare her. Days later, after Sula's and Nel's initiation, four white Irish boys taunt Sula and Nel. And Sula counterattacks with a self-inflicted wound: "Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge . . . [The wound appeared as] a button mushroom, curling in the cherry blood that ran into the corners of the slate . . . 'If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?'" (Morrison 55). The cherry blood imagery symbolizes Sula's broken hymen. The cut mirrors a sexual act where Sula loses her virginity. Before Sula even sleeps with a man, she makes sure to handle this part of intercourse herself. Whatever happens to her body, she chooses it. She would rather hurt herself than watch or allow someone else to hurt her. Though men begin to notice Sula's sexuality as she leaves her girlhood behind, she controls her body.

While Sula rules her body, Temple forsakes hers. Once Popeye rapes Temple, he takes her to Miss Reba's brothel where Temple obsesses over darkness. She enters a self-created, psychological underworld. In the car ride to Miss Reba's brothel, Temple begins her mental descent: "She sat limp in the corner of the seat, watching the steady backward rush of the land . . . sitting with her legs close together, listening to the hot minute seeping of her blood, saying dully to herself, I'm still bleeding. I'm still bleeding" (Faulkner 137). After the rape, Temple continues to bleed. Now that she spills blood for Popeye—blood that symbolizes her life force and her womanhood—her body belongs to Popeye, and later, to other men. Before the rape, Temple relies on her body, and she directs how her life unfolds. Once the rape takes place, though, she realizes her shortcomings: "I'd look at my legs and I'd think how much I had done for them. I'd think about how many dances I had taken them to—crazy, like that. Because I thought how much I'd done for them, and now they'd gotten me into this" (Faulkner 217). Her legs fail her—she endures the rape and lacks the strength to run away—so she relinquishes her body to men.

Subsequently, the surrender offers Temple relief. Her body bears the site of the rape and her Southern Belle image that never offers her security. She no longer needs her Southern Belle reputation anyway. Minnie, Miss Reba's maid, tells Temple: "We don't stand on no ceremony here" (Faulkner 144). Her revered status has thus lost its meaning. Temple begins to comply as Popeye's plaything. Her location is integral to her compliance. Memphis, Mississippi contrasts to Jefferson where her father, who reinforces her sexual purity, resides. She leaves her home, wherein white, privileged men idealize her, and enters "the vice district and the famed black metropolis, settings for Temple's captivity and debasement, [which] are metonymically figured as a black prostitute" (Lester 43). Cheryl Lester refers to the "young negress" who "serves as an understated visual signifier of sexuality and race" (43). In Memphis, where Temple's sexuality is uninhibited, sexuality is associated with blackness. Temple engages in sexual acts and transforms into a frozen woman, surrounded by the color black. At the brothel, Popeye locks Temple in a room where she may not leave. Here, Temple remains still. She covers her body and her mind with blackness: "She wore a too-large gown of cerise crepe, black against the linen. Her hair was a black sprawl . . . After the others left the room she lay for a time, head and all beneath the covers . . . She was thinking about half-past-ten-oclock. The hour for dressing for a dance" (Faulkner 151). Underneath the covers in the black hour of "half-past-ten-oclock" at night, Temple's mind wanders far away from her entrapment. For Temple, time ceases to exist except for "half-past-ten-oclock." Later, Temple resurfaces and acknowledges time again.

While Temple disappears into an underworld, Sula stays adrift amidst turmoil. Despite losing all of the people she loves, Sula never falters. Sula's first loss occurs when she kills Chicken Little, a boy from the Bottom, watching as he drowns. Chicken Little's death will affect Sula's and Nel's future relationships, as they will be overshadowed by this horrific event (Bakerman 552). Once Sula grows up, her hopeless relationships begin. She never forms permanent attachments to the men she sleeps with. By her own volition, Sula sleeps around, and she enjoys it. Sula dislikes the idea of marriage. It would mean tying her to another individual, and Sula wishes to float freely. First and foremost, Sula belongs to herself: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison 92). The community members disagree with Sula's philosophy and gossip that Sula sleeps with white men, black men, married men, and any other man she wants. While it may seem that Sula acts heartlessly, she finds her only happiness in these fleeting sexual encounters. During sex, she finds a balance between peacefulness and extreme chaos:

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 . . . During the lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge . . . She leaped from the edge into soundlessness and went down howling, howling in a stinging awareness of the endings of things: an eye of sorrow in the midst of all that hurricane rage of joy. There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time. (Morrison 122-3)

She experiences more death, but here, death behaves how she wills it. Time takes away her friends and her family, but during sex, time dies. She accepts the "ending of things." Unlike emotional attachments or ephemeral relationships, sex fortifies her. Once she finishes the sexual act, she must move on to another sexual partner and search for the "cutting edge" again. By continuously changing sexual partners and never forming relationships, Sula relies on herself instead of on a man.

Sula not only suffers when it comes to relationships with men but also in her relationships with her mother, Hannah, and Nel; however, Sula perseveres despite these losses. When Sula overhears her mother say, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her,” she turns her back on her without a second thought (Morrison 57). Sula perceives this statement as a betrayal. Shortly thereafter, Hannah burns to death, and Sula watches. When Sula dies, she recounts why she watched: “I never meant anything. I stood there . . . thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing” (Morrison 147). Sula never allows herself to feel emotions, but her mother’s death “thrilled” her. During her mother’s painful death, Sula finds compensation for her mother admitting that she does not “like” her and proves that she does not need her mother’s love.

Additionally, Sula loses Nel, who begrudges Sula for sleeping with her husband, but Sula sees the event as insignificant. If anything, Sula thinks that Nel’s marriage weighs her down. Sula says, “My lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (Morrison 143). No one holds Sula down or gives her anything unwanted. Just like when she cuts her finger, Sula prefers to hurt herself. She despises anything “second-handed.” Despite the death of these relationships, she stays strong. While Nel negatively judges Sula for her carefree lifestyle—she describes Sula’s behavior as “having done . . . dirt”—Sula ponders whether Nel justly accuses her of wickedness: “How do you know? . . . About who was good. How you know it was you? . . . Maybe it wasn’t you. Maybe it was me” (Morrison 145-6). She refuses to take the entire blame for Chicken Little’s death and her and Nel’s broken friendship. For Sula, boundaries—social norms and moral codes—do not exist. Sula separates herself from everyone in the Bottom. Nel as well as the Bottom community may want to define Sula by her sexuality but, they wrongly judge Sula basing their assumptions on one quality alone. Morrison discusses the misconceptions about a black woman’s sexuality: “If she was a sexual object in the eyes of men, that was their doing. Sex was *one* of her dimensions. It has to be just one, for life required many other things of her” (“What the Black Woman Thinks” 24-5). Similarly, Sula’s sexuality is “one of her dimensions” and not the only quality which defines her. She not only wants “to make herself,” she also wants to make herself indefinable.

Likewise, Temple undergoes significant changes that redefine her. Once Temple escapes from Popeye, she returns to her father’s house, challenging her old and ruined Southern Belle status. At the Old Frenchman place and Miss Reba’s brothel, Popeye, Ruby, and Miss Reba think Temple is “not worth . . . building chivalric constructions upon” (Roberts 137). Temple may seem worthless. However, once she returns home, she becomes a “chivalric construction” and redefines her Southern womanhood. When she bleeds in the car after Popeye rapes her, and later, when Popeye smacks her lips that look like red, “savage cupid’s bow[s],” she bears men’s sins upon her flesh (Faulkner 214). The blood imagery reinforces the deaths that occur at the Old Frenchman place and Miss Reba’s brothel: Temple’s funeral while Popeye rapes her and Temple’s descent into her underworld. Temple sacrifices her life in order to garner strength and seek retribution for men’s wrongdoings. After her sacrifice, Temple carries her tie to the deadly underworld and resurrects in her “black hat” that she wears to Lee Goodwin’s trial (Faulkner 282). Lee Goodwin lived at the Old Frenchman place and faces a murder charge for a murder that Popeye committed. Yet, when Temple testifies at the trial, her statement sentences Goodwin to death. Rather than avenging the suffering that Popeye causes her, Temple punishes Goodwin for never stopping Popeye or helping her escape the Frenchman place (Urigo 444). Temple no longer uses her “chivalric construction” as a crutch; she uses it as a weapon.

Back at home, she sits with her father:

From beneath her smart new hat she seemed to follow with her eyes the waves of music, to dissolve into the dying brasses, across the pool and the opposite semicircle of trees where at somber intervals the dead tranquil queens in stained marble mused, and on into the sky lying prone and vanquished in the embrace of the season of rain and death. (Faulkner 317)

Temple's "new hat" represents how Temple renews her body and mind. After Popeye rapes her, Temple's hat appears messy: "Temple was beside him. Her hat was jammed onto the back of her head, her hair escaping beneath the crumpled brim in matted clots" (Faulkner 136). Out of Popeye's grasp, she appears collected, and her hat sits on her head perfectly. Instead of lying still and peering into the darkness as Popeye rapes her, she sits still and observes "the dead" and "death." Now, she knows secrets that no one else knows. She is a new woman who challenges her old, objectified Southern Belle status when she recognizes men's evils and crucifies them for it.

Correspondingly, Sula is resurrected from the dead as a goddess. Sula understands that it is her turn to die, for she exhausts her sexuality—the only means by which she finds happiness. She repeats the rhythmical phrase: "*I have sung all the songs all the songs I have sung all the songs there are*" (Morrison 137). Since she has "sung all the songs," she accepts her death. Instead of reaching an end, Sula achieves renewal in death: "Here, only here . . . she might draw her legs up to her chest, close her eyes, put her thumb in her mouth and float over and down the tunnels . . . until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness and it would envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always" (Morrison 148-9). The "thumb" and "curl" images mirror a child in a mother's womb. Death protects Sula like a mother, and the word "always" denotes the permanence she will achieve in death.

Although Sula dies, she experiences a rebirth. Erich Neumann's Great Goddess archetype reflects Sula's character: "The Great Goddess is the flowing unity of subterranean and celestial primordial water . . . and life is her child, a fish eternally swimming inside her" (Neumann 228). Sula "floats" as she dies, and the water imagery reflects that she will be born again, for life is "eternally swimming" in her. Furthermore, Sula's consciousness continues in death: "Well, I'll be damned . . . it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nell" (Morrison 149). Even death lacks the ability to defy Sula. Again, Sula somehow controls this wound. The only difference is that this time, instead of her thumb bleeding, her heart stops. This marks the ultimate ending. Yet, she will heal from this wound as well. Sula will mark her place in the world again as a resurrected goddess.

At the end of both texts, Temple Drake and Sula Peace overcome their individual traumas. After Popeye's relentless violence, Temple redefines her Southern Belle position. She replaces her pure, innocent image with a darkened, knowledgeable image she wields herself. Conversely, Sula always possesses control over her actions, and, in death, she transforms into a goddess. While Faulkner allows his heroine to access her strength after harrowing events, Morrison's heroine possesses her power from birth. Morrison's text suggests that women deserve worthier titles than "sluts" or "whores." The Bottom community, including Sula's friends and family, try to pigeonhole her, defining her as merely a sexual being; however, she ignores their objectification and believes in her decency. Conversely, Temple gains her independence after she encounters sexual violation, the darkness of Memphis, and ascends from her psychological underworld. Despite Temple's and Sula's different circumstances, they both rise above their

pain. Once Temple and Sula resurrect as a new Southern Belle and a Great Goddess, they cease to feel any pain at all.

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