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Published by: St. Louis University
Stable URL: [http://www.jstor.org/stable/2904289](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2904289)
Accessed: 11-05-2015 08:50 UTC

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TONI MORRISON’S SULA: A BLACK WOMAN’S EPIC

KAREN F. STEIN*

In Toni Morrison’s novels of black American life, appearance and reality, the magical and the real, the tragic and the comic are continually juxtaposed. Irony operates on many levels, as the hopes and plans of Morrison's characters are frustrated by their white neighbors and by fate.¹ The author plays with a variety of viewpoints as whites and blacks, husbands and wives, parents and children observe and misunderstand each other.²

Perhaps Morrison’s multi-layered vision has been shaped by her complex relationship to literary traditions: As a black woman author, she is a double outsider in our patriarchal, white culture—a position which allows her to criticize both the white and the black worlds.³ But whatever the source of her unique vision, the result is her books’ complex literary and moral texture. As we are drawn into her stories, we must shed our misconceptions and question our judgments until we arrive at the core of truth.

Morrison typically frames her tales within mythic narrative structures, thus creating a heroic context for her themes and characters. At the same time, she develops a rich irony by juxtaposing heroic expectation with mundane reality. Furthermore, by pitting contrasting figures against one another, Morrison repeatedly reverses the reader’s expectations. It is Morrison’s use of these two devices, ironic structuring and character pairing, that I wish to examine in discussing her 1973 novel Sula.

The central figures in the novel, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, are diametric opposites whose lives are linked by bonds too powerful for either to resist. Ultimately hero and villain change roles, as their relationship grows into a larger selfhood. Using heroic conventions as a structural basis for her novel, Morrison creates layers of irony and multiple perceptions that add depth to her analysis of contemporary black women. Although the characters’ lives in an impoverished rural community, tellingly named “the Bottom,” contrast markedly with the epic figures whose names they bear (i.e., Ajax, Helen, Eve, and Judas), Morrison’s characters are measured by the heroic yardstick. And true heroism does flourish here, in the most unlikely soil, as the book’s hero painfully comes to terms with her own evil.

Almost all American novelists have written tales of questing heroes, creating characters of heroic stature whose journeys lead to tragic destruction or comic renewal. But these heroic myths have tended to be cast in androcentric terms. Joseph Campbell’s well-known Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton Univ. Press, 1949), for example, traces the literary journeys of male heroes who overcome dangerous foes, mate with symbolically significant women, and return to restore order to their kingdoms. Because traditional heroic patterns describe male characters, the lives of questing female heroes are often anomalous.⁴ Living in a culture that sets limits on acceptable female behavior, they often face constraint rather than enhancement of life. To some readers, their actions may seem aberrant, more suited to punishment than reward.

To combat such traditional attitudes, women writers frequently use irony and parody and invert traditional motifs. Thus, we find Morrison grounding Sula in the epic tradition, but using ironic reversals of epic expectations to create a new definition of heroism that will encompass the lives of black women. Unlike the stock epic tale, in which the hero, driven by inner compulsion to leave society in search of knowledge and power, undertakes a dangerous but successful journey and returns in triumph to transform a fallen world, Sula presents a tale of courage in the face of limitation and powerlessness, of self-knowledge wrested from loss and suffering, of social amelioration eked out of hatred and fear. Because it is the drab and ordinary Nel rather than the more flamboyant Sula, with whom Nel is paired, that achieves heroic stature, the book dramatizes the inwardness of the quest. Most of the characters in Sula misinterpret the novel’s two central figures, permitting Morrison to emphasize the private nature of heroism and the complexity of moral judgment.

Epic in scope, rich in Biblical allusions, the book’s vision, like that of the heroic tale, is of human life played out against a background of natural and supernatural forces. The novel’s mythic elements—repeated deaths by fire and water, rituals of naming, signs and dreams, the mysteries of human motivation and behavior—are held in balance by irony; chronological structure; a taut, objective narrative style; and harsh realism. A recurring rhythm of birth, death, and rebirth structures the novel, every chapter describing an actual or symbolic death. To compound the irony, death is often seen as positive, as in Eva’s burning of Plum, a ritual of release and purification.⁵ Unlike many traditional epics, which depict the founding of a civilization or its restoration to proper order, Sula begins with the razing of the Bottom to make room for a whites-only golf course. This destruction, which sets the book’s tone of hovering doom, is both example and symbol of the steady erosion that the black community and its members suffer. The contrast of fertile life and sterile machinery reenacts the black struggle to survive in the face of white oppression, the epic struggle between life and death. Economically and politically powerless, the black community is vulnerable to white society’s exploitative self-aggrandizement. By the book’s ambiguous conclusion only one character—Nel—will enact the epic promise of renewal.

Set in a small Ohio town during the years 1919 to 1965, Sula chronicles the fortunes of the women in two matriarchal households within the black community, particularly Nel Wright and Sula Peace, whose lives represent the range of choices possible for black women in modern America. As we watch them grow to maturity, the heroes learn about sexuality, evil, power, love, and, primarily, about the prospects and limits of their lives, the difficulties of survival in an inimical world. Sula and Nel represent opposite

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approaches to the epic tasks of self-discovery and integration into society. Whereas the questing hero is traditionally an embodiment of a culture’s noblest values, the rigid Nel is too bound by convention to undertake a journey, and the adventurous Sula appears to be the antithesis of her society’s codes. Further, although Sula’s quest appears to be a failure, her return brings an unexpected, albeit short-lived, boon to the Bottom. Although Sula is shunned and feared as a reprobate, paradoxically, her negative example spurs others to greater virtue, and she inspires the psychological growth of the friend she betrays. Thus, a seemingly failed quest has unexpectedly positive ramifications.

At the book’s heart is the tale of the friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peake. Beginning when they are adolescent girls and continuing as they mature, the friendship changes in nature but remains the deepest attachment and most profound influence on both of their lives. Although the two girls share dreams of adventure and unfolding selfhood, their approaches to the task of maturation are diametrically opposed. Nel casts her visions in traditional romantic fantasies and sacrifices her independence to conventionality, while Sula, insisting on her independence, becomes isolated from society; she is free but directionless.

Obedient, quiet, and repressed, Nel first experiences herself as an individual apart from her family when she gazes in a mirror and dreams of traveling in the world beyond the Bottom. “But,” the narrator interjects at this point, “that was before she met Sula . . .” (p. 25). The introduction of Sula at this crucial birth of Nel’s self-awareness highlights the link between the two girls. In fact, it is her sense of her nascent identity which gives Nel the strength to defy her mother’s prohibition and establish a friendship with Sula. Yet it is to be Sula, rather than Nel, who eventually realizes Nel’s dreams of a journey and of independent selfhood.

As is frequently the case in epics, dreams play a significant role in the story. Dreams build the initial link between Sula and Nel, and foretell their different paths of self-expression. In her daydreams, Nel fantasizes “lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince” (p. 44) like the passive fairy-tale heroine. When Nel later marries, her life becomes one of passive limitation and stagnation, described in terms of spider web imagery suggestive of the entanglement in her own hair. Sula’s fantasies, by contrast, are actively sensuous ones in which she gallops “through her own mind on a gray-and-white horse tasting sugar and smelling roses” (p. 44). Resisting human ties, she is the daring, sensuous, active woman, seeking to experience life and her own being to the fullest. In her isolation, Sula is free, but she is directionless. Because neither of these two paths leads to personal fulfillment and social regeneration, the novel dramatizes the ironic contrast between epic expectation and actual achievement.

The process of self-development carries with it the hope of fulfillment and achieving selfhood. Again, Sula depicts reality frustrating expectation. Instead of enlarging their worlds and achieving contentment and fruition, Nel and Sula repeatedly find experience constricting their lives and bringing the bitterness of death and betrayal. This ironic reversal is epitomized in the chapter entitled “1922,” which begins with the girls’ sexual awakening and ends with a funeral. The book’s single use of lush natural description heralds their rite of passage:

Then summer came. A summer limp with the weight of blossomed things. Heavy sunflowers weeping over fences; iris curling and browning at the edges far away from their purple hearts; ears of corn letting their auburn hair wind down their stalks. (p. 48)

Nature’s fertile ripening evokes the ripening sexuality of the friends. Yet, as the description of the personified natural world makes clear, ripening is simply a stage in the growth that leads inevitably to death and decay.

In this luxuriant Summer of 1922, Nel and Sula reaffirm their awareness of themselves as sexually desirable by passing an ice cream parlor where they receive the appreciative stares and comments of the lounging young men. But this sense of complacent well-being is shattered by two events which occur in rapid succession and blight the promise of Sula’s life. The first crisis is Sula’s overhearing her mother comment casually that she doesn’t like her. The second is her accidental drowning of the young boy Chicken Little while playing with him near the river. This double disillusionment determines the subsequent course of Sula’s life: “The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow” (p. 103). Life’s mysteries confound her; she learns poorly and too soon the lessons of death and of the essential untrustworthiness and isolation of human beings.

The chapter that begins in such delicious anticipation ends with the funeral of Chicken Little. Leaving the funeral together, Nel and Sula outwardly appear to be like “any two young girlfriends trotting up the road on a summer day wondering what happened to butterflies in the winter” (p. 57). The irony of this image highlights the tension between their apparent childlike innocence and their terrible knowledge of death.

The incidents of the chapter “1922” reflect a recurring pattern in the book. Repeatedly, an individual at the height of his or her powers dies or witnesses a traumatizing death. Sula is destroyed by her involvement in Chicken Little’s drowning. Directionless, without a foundation of human trust, she is isolated, a pariah.

For Nel, sexual awakening also produces a kind of death: It leads her to a death of self in her marriage to Jude Greene. (As in the case with other names, Jude’s is of ironic import: He will be Judas, betrayer of Nel’s hopes.) Her marriage is described in the imagery of death. Ajax advises Jude that girls want to be miserable: “‘Ax em to die for you and they yours for life’” (p. 71). Married women are seen as “folded . . . into starched coffins” (p. 105). In Jude’s eyes, Nel is to become a part of him, “the hem . . . of his garment”; “the two of them together would make one Jude” (p. 71). This, of course, signifies the death of Nel’s already fragile sense of self. An image which recurrently describes the contraction of Nel’s life after marriage is that of the web (see pp. 82, 103-104). Caught in a trap of her own devising, Nel, spider-like, comes to occupy a small, but safe, space.

Nel’s marriage separates her from Sula, who alone, of all the women in the Bottom, rejects the limits, the obligations and restrictions, of marriage and motherhood. Viewing marriage as compounded of convenience and caution, Sula avoids such ties. While her repudiation of these bonds renders her an outcast in the eyes of her community, she
perceives herself as free, and therefore able, as none of the other women are, to be honest and to experience life and self fully. Her journey is the enactment of that freedom.

Most epics focus on the initiation phase of the hero’s journey—with its dangerous, often fantastic adventures leading to participation in the sources of universal power. Because Sula’s freedom is uncommitted, her journey is seen only briefly; nevertheless, her return will lead to enlightenment.

On Nel’s wedding day, Sula, with an amused smile, leaves town, returning ten years later. Her quest for knowledge and experience is described only in retrospect. Her years at college, her travels and romantic liaisons are mentioned parenthetically; she remembers most as boring. The wisdom she attains is the cynic’s. While the heroic journey is typically a source of power, this is not the case for Sula. Although Campbell defines a “mystical marriage” as the hero’s “ultimate adventure,” representing an increase of power and the attainment of “total mastery of life” (Hero with a Thousand Faces, pp. 109–20), Sula’s sexuality breeds only boredom and despair. She learns of the alienation she reaches in post-coital sadness, when she descends to a private core of loneliness and melancholy nostalgia. Sexual intercourse, rather than promoting human relatedness and mystic insight, increases her isolation and misery (Sula, p. 106).

Described as an artist without a medium (p. 105), dangerous because undirected, lacking discipline or aim, Sula is free but empty. She never makes the existentialist’s commitment, the surrender of freedom through attachment to an idea or person that de Beauvoir and others see as the truest hallmark of human freedom.7 Her one human relationship of significance, the friendship with Nel, provides her with a center, a place she can call home: “Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits” (p. 103). Her need to reestablish her link to Nel brings her back.

It is consistently at the points of tangency to each other that the lives of Nel and Sula are most vitally lived. We remember that their friendship came into being in dreams before the two girls met each other. More significantly, Morrison’s imagery suggests a kinship so close as to be a physical connection. In their girlhood, “... their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s... a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other” (p. 72). When Sula returns, the ties remain strong. Nel’s home-centered life is expanded and enriched when Sula returns to the Bottom. Her reappearance is described in physical terms. To Nel, her friend’s return is “like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed... Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself” (p. 82). For Sula, lacking a central core, Nel is “the closest thing to both an other and a self” (p. 103); she thinks of them as “two throats and one eye” (p. 126). The imagery of physical connection suggests a more profound bond than friendship between the two women; they are two parts of one personality or, as Morrison has stated, “If they were one woman, they would be complete.” As doubles, they complement each other and, combined, make up a complete picture of the hero.

Although it is her connection to Nel that prompts Sula to return to the Bottom, she jeopardizes the friendship by refusing to acknowledge any ties as binding. Sula brings knowledge of a wider world, objective distance, a fresh, disinterested perspective that enables her to find humor in the everyday details of her friend’s domestic life. For a brief time they recapture the sweetness of their adolescent companionship. Enjoying their shared reminiscences, Nel is relaxed and happy; this is the only time we see her laugh. However, this harmonious interlude is shattered when Sula seduces Jude. For her, acting out of sheer restlessness and habit, out of whim, out of a need to challenge the very fabric of marriage itself, this liaison is as brief and unimportant as any of her others. For Nel, it is a betrayal of friendship. Jude, discovered, leaves. Accusing Sula of disloyalty, Nel remains aloof, although she thinks of her friend often. Without Sula and Jude, with her children growing away from her as they grow up, Nel’s life contracts even further, narrowing into a loveless round of duties and responsibilities, to job, children, and church.

Partly from a sense of duty, but more from a need to confront her directly and discover the reason for her betrayal, Nel visits the dying Sula three years later. Sula, still interested in observing her own mind, is lying in bed, analyzing the sensations of pain in its various stages, as she had earlier indulged in fantasies of savoring the sweetness of sugar and roses. Still wry and quick-tongued, she teases Nel, challenging her belief that she is a wronged victim: “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?” (p. 125). Sula implies that it is Nel herself who has been the traitor. For when Nel married Jude, she severed the ties of friendship that bound the special relationship between the two girls and grounded Sula in the human community. Without Nel, Sula becomes an outsider.

Although the typical epic hero experiences a transforming vision which he or she brings back to redeem society, Sula has attained only a knowledge of her own sadness, alienation, and loss. Now, however, at her death, half-joking, she articulates her own tar apocalyptic vision of a Messianic era in which all people will come to love each other:

“After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds... and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit;... then there’ll be a little love left over for me.” (p. 125)

Her comic sexual analogy to the promised Biblical period of peace and love stresses harmony, sexual passion, and equality between the powerful and the powerless. In the outrageousness of her vision, the novel ironically emphasizes the distance between the ideal of epic regeneration and the impossibility of redemption in the fallen world of modern America.

Sula’s final speech asserts her own goodness, and questions Nel’s assumption of righteousness. Nel leaves, “embarrassed, irritable and a little bit ashamed” (p. 126). After her words of triumphant self-justification, Sula curls up in a fetal position and dies, thinking of a comforting return to a permanent womb-like sleep. At the very moment when breath and heartbeat cease, Sula, always aware of her experiences, and thinking of her one friend, notes, “...it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nel!”’ (p. 128). Acting out her
childhood dream of exploring her mind and tasting sensuous pleasures, Sula has lived hard, made no compromises and now dies young.

Sula’s death is interpreted by her community as a sign of approaching good fortune. Because of her wanderings and estrangement from the usual human ties, the townsfolk believed her to be a witch. Signs and portents were attributed to her: Her return was accompanied by a “plague of robins” (p. 77). Yet, ironically, her negative example was a warning which inspired others to greater goodness. Her blessing to her community is achieved indirectly; it lies in the improved behavior with which others respond to her presumed evil:

Their conviction of Sula’s evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, 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. 102)

Contrary to expectation, bad luck follows her death. Rumors that blacks will be hired to build the tunnel on the New River Road prove false. Severe frost kills the fall crops and strains the limited resources of the Bottom. Epidemics of croup and scarlet fever erupt. But worse, with Sula gone, her neighbors relapse into their former lackadaisical ways. The increase of energy and virtue with which they reacted to her seeming evil disappears with her death:

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. Daughters who had complained bitterly about the responsibilities of taking care of their aged mothers-in-law had altered when Sula locked Eva away . . . . Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoiled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. (p. 132)

Accordingly, Sula’s boon to her society is achieved by her negative model, and lasts for only a short time. But for Nel, the person to whom she was closest, Sula’s impact is more intense.

To Nel, Sula brings not only loss and pain, but also, even after her death, an enlarged self-awareness. Although Nel leads a restrained, constricted life, she survives. Through her involvement with Sula she learns about herself, attaining greater openness and emotional capacity. She comes to realize that caution had led her to accept limitations too readily and that moral smugness had blinded her to her own potential for evil.

Believing herself morally superior to Sula, Nel realizes later her own complicity in Chicken Little’s death. When Nel makes one of her charity visits to the old people’s home, Sula’s grandmother Eva confuses her with Sula and asserts that she was involved in the drowning. Nel is upset by the accusation. She has always been careful to think she saw him drown; with Eva’s challenge she acknowledges to herself that she watched and even experienced a secret excitement. (Following Nel’s example, Sula had watched her mother Hannah burn to death.)

All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behavior when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula’s frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little’s body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment. (p. 146)

Able for the first time to identify with her friend, Nel admits her own capacity for evil, learning finally Sula’s disturbing early lesson of human untrustworthiness. Nel had judged Sula harshly and prolonged their estrangement because of her own failure to confront her dark impulses. Her new recognition of her psychological kinship with Sula unlocks Nel’s depths of long pent-up emotion. She comes to an anguished realization: It is not Jude after all, but Sula, her childhood companion, that she misses so painfully. She pours out her grief, releasing feelings she has long denied. In her mourning for Sula, twenty-four years after her friend’s death, Nel at last weeps. With her new willingness to face suppressed feelings comes relief from another longstanding malaise, an imaginary dread. As she weeps by Sula’s grave, a vague terror breaks and scatters like dandelion seeds, her ominous fears exercised (p. 149). She has been the villain of the novel, but her tears are a cleansing baptism.9

According to Carl F. Keppler, the second self in literature (here, Sula) is the darker, mysterious, more aware one. Often in conflict, the two parties to this relationship represent for each other their own unacknowledged potentials, simultaneously fascinating and frightening. The symbol of the second self signifies the human desire to become whole through complete development of the total range of possible selfhood. Tensions between the two may lead to destruction, but, says Keppler, the process “strips away all masks of self-enlargement.”10 In this way, Nel and Sula grow in self-knowledge and understanding through their links to each other.

In the novel Sula learns what she does of the meaning of human relatedness and of the human admixture of good and evil in her link to Nel. As the second self, Sula experiments with freedom and honesty beyond the limits allowable within the social order, and lives the life of adventure Nel dreamed of but denied herself. Nel, on the other hand, expands her imaginative and emotional capacity through her association with Sula. It is her continuing love for Sula that makes possible her most cogent insight into her own motivation and her deepest emotional response. When she weeps for Sula, she is freed from old constraints and misconceptions, stripped of her false moral pride and smugness. Through this mourning for her dead friend/self at Sula’s graveside, Nel is symbolically reborn as the surviving self, continuing the process of growth and self-awareness that Sula began.

Nel’s moment of insight, however, is not couched in the glowing redemptive images associated with the epic realizations of most heroes, but in more ironic, more limited terms. The book ends with her lamentation: “It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (p. 149). In the novel’s vision, the ability to survive in the face of a hostile world and to accept one’s fate in full self-knowledge constitutes the real nobility left to the hero. The truest heroism lies not in external battle, as in the wars which destroy the novel’s men, but in confrontation with the self. Nel, who never left home, makes the terrifying journey into the depths of her soul. By admitting the guilt she had tried to deny, and recognizing her failure of sympathy for her friend, Nel comes to terms with herself and frees her emotional capacity. Thus, Nel, the cautious, conventional woman, learns the meaning of Sula’s life, and survives.
THE TATTOOED HEART AND THE SERPENTINE EYE: MORRISON’S CHOICE OF AN EPIGRAPH FOR SULA
C. LYNN MUNRO*

By selecting the passage “Nobody knew my rose of the world but me... I had too much glory. They don't want glory like that in nobody's heart” from Tennessee Williams’ play The Rose Tattoo1 to serve as an epigraph for Sula,2 Toni Morrison has not only provided the reader with a pithy statement of the novel’s underlying theme, but has also implicitly invited the reader to consider the play as an analog to the novel. If one reads the two works consecutively, one’s understanding of the novel is enhanced, and it becomes clear that both Morrison and Williams are intent upon examining the ravages of time and misbegotten love. Further, their common aim seems to be to force their audiences to recognize the tragic dimension which colors the most mundane of lives and to realize that much of the tragedy is a result of the individual’s inability to transcend or even recognize his or her own self-indulgence.

In the context of the play, the passage with which Morrison has chosen to preface her novel ironically undercuts the validity of using nomenclae love as an excuse for avoiding active engagement with others and points to the risks inherent in what Christopher Lasch has termed the “narcissistic preoccupation with the self.”3 Serafina Delle Rose, like Nel in Sula, effectively abdicates her responsibilities to herself and others following the loss of her husband Rosario. Rather than come to terms with her grief, she transforms her home into a veritable shrine and sequesters herself amid lifeless dressmaking dummies, preferring to relive the past rather than to risk engagement in the present. Concomitantly, Serafina, like Sula, rather than acknowledging the truths voiced by her townspeople, decries their pettiness and maintains a solipsistic world view which allows her to proclaim that “nobody knew my rose of the world but me... I had too much glory. They don't want glory like that in nobody's heart” (RT, p. 199). While this assertion allows her to maintain a sense of self (just as it allows Sula to assert the goodness of her chosen course), it also effectively paralyzes her, leaving her in a state approximating self-immolation.

Both Sula and The Rose Tattoo are characterized by an “ironic consistency, which jolts one into acute awareness by its contrariness while it offers comfort through laughter.”4

What distinguishes the two works, however, is that, while Morrison relies on subtle undercutting and innuendo, Williams, perhaps, as J. L. Styan suggests, “because he does not trust his audience to accept his ironies without their being overstated,”5 enunciates that which is incongruous and out of proportion. Because he is writing a drama meant for live performance, Williams cannot rely, as Morrison does, on narrative and lyrical passages to enrich his meaning. Nor can he collapse time as Morrison does in order to provide context and continuity to the events which he records. Instead, he must set the stage and cast his characters in such a way that the audience gets an immediate sense of what each signifies.

Because she has chosen to cast her material in the form of a novel, Morrison faces fewer restrictions. She can even postpone introducing her protagonist, Sula, until she has given the reader a sense of Medallion’s ambiance and an understanding of the primacy the residents of the Bottom attach to sheer survival skills. By exposing the reader to Shadrack’s National Suicide Day, Helene Wright’s rigid conservativism, and Eva’s benevolent tyranny, prior to introducing Sula, Morrison is able to prepare a rich context for the reader’s encounter with Sula. As a result, rather than seeing Sula as peculiar, the reader senses that she, like the town’s other residents, is attempting to forge a strategy which will allow her to respond to the vicissitudes of life without compromising herself.

While Serafina is attempting a similar feat, Williams must begin by focusing the audience’s attention on Serafina and her response to her environment rather than by trying to establish a context in which to introduce her. Only by showing her interacting with others (initially, with her daughter Rosa and the conjure woman Assunta) can Williams highlight her values and predispositions. His aim throughout the first scene is to elicit an immediate response from his audience, thereby overcoming the defenses which they have erected against the recognition of the tragic dimension of everyday life. It is for this reason that Williams interjects what he himself has called “a certain foolery, a certain distortion toward the grotesque” to disarm his viewers and induce them to come to terms with the “almost liquid warmth of unchecked human sympathies relieved of self-[]-consciousness [and] allowed to function.”6

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