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Within literature, it is not uncommon for characters to be sacrificed, exiled, or rejected by their communities. For some this happens because of the choices they make, but for others it is by no doing of their own. When talking about these characters, we can use two biblical phrases to describe them: the Christ figure and the scapegoat, respectively. Though very similar in most aspects, each carries its own implications, and each creates different meanings when used to describe a character. In Toni Morrison's *Sula,* Sula Peace is neither fully innocent nor fully guilty, yet she becomes a sacrificial outcast for the community in Medallion, Ohio. By looking at Rene Girard's *Categories of Scapegoats¸* we can understand the difference between a mythical scapegoat and a non-mythical scapegoat, and how the literary scapegoat falls between the two. Then, by applying the characteristics of the literary scapegoat, we can understand how Sula's experience in this role shapes those around her and the narrative as a whole. Finally, we can see how the sacrifice and projection suffered by Sula is a reflection of how black women are scapegoated in our society today.

Scapegoats, Christ Figures, and the In-Between

The concept of the scapegoat has its origins in Judaism. Biblically, it can be found in Leviticus 16, when it

is said that Aaron will use two goats; one for a sin-offering and one to send away. Andrea Dworkin discusses this tradition in depth, saying, "the Jews of antiquity would sacrifice two goats: one would be killed as an offering to a harsh and judging God; one would be taken to the wilderness and turned loose….Murder and exile are the two paradigmatic fates of scapegoats" (16). Traditionally, the scapegoat referred only to the physical goat being sacrificed to atone for sin. However, as time has gone on, scapegoating has become a more broadly applicable term. This began with the biblical figure Jesus, who was the ultimate scapegoat. Sent to earth with a sole purpose, Jesus took on the sins of the world in order to atone for those sins. In contemporary times, the scapegoat has become more than a biblical figure, and has taken on various forms.

Girard found that traditionally, there were two types of scapegoats: the mythical scapegoat and the non-mythical scapegoat. The mythical scapegoat tends to be complacent to its treatment, similar to the goats used in Leviticus, and lacks agency. Further, the mythical scapegoat "is innocent to the extent that he is no more guilty than his persecutors", and receives blame and condemnation through "the universal fiat of his society in view of his crimes" (Girard 250). Mythical scapegoats are not wholly blameless, yet the wrong they have done is not so extreme to warrant their label as outcasts. On the flip side are non-mythical scapegoats, which are modeled after Jesus. The non-mythical scapegoat "is innocent of any wrongdoing" and "chooses voluntarily to suffer" (250). Non-mythical scapegoats like Jesus become the perfect sacrifice, because they are blameless and they are willing. The issues with the mythical scapegoat and non-mythical scapegoat are that neither captures the complexity of those who are scapegoated.

To combat the limits of the mythical and non-mythical scapegoat, Girard presents the concept of the literary scapegoat. The literary scapegoat falls between the first two categories, capturing the complexity of those who are projected onto or sacrificed. They are "neither totally subdued by authorial delusion nor perfectly heard by virtue of an absolute presence of innocence" (251). Girard found that most scapegoats in modern literature fell in the middle ground of the literary scapegoat. A literary scapegoat's narrative often follows a standard path: 1) the consensus of the society to isolate, project onto, and victimize a specific person; 2) protest from an authority concerning who is being scapegoated; 3) personal advocacy by the scapegoat; and 4) redemption for the scapegoat (252). The literary scapegoat lacks the pure innocence of the Christ figure and the complacency of the mythical scapegoat. Instead, the literary scapegoat creates a complex narrative of who is in the wrong, who has been wronged, and what the purpose of scapegoating really is.

Sula as a Literary Scapegoat

First, to consider Sula's classification as a literary scapegoat, we must consider why she is neither wholly innocent nor wholly guilty. Sula is not blameless; some of her actions throughout the book have harmed those around her repeatedly. Her harshest action is her affair with Jude, the husband of her best friend, Nel. Sula also hurts her grandmother, Eva, by putting her into a nursing home rather than allowing her to stay in her house. On the opposite end, Sula is often blamed for things that she did not do, especially following her return to the Bottom, after being gone for ten years. She is accused of pushing a little boy down the stairs, making a man choke on a chicken bone, and even of being a devil. By looking at Sula's life, it

is clear that she has not lived a blameless life, but she has also been accused of much more than she is responsible for.

Now turning to the literary scapegoat's progression, we can see what this looks like in Sula's story, and the impact it has on the book as a whole. The first stage is the societal decision to outcast and project onto a specific person. Upon Sula's return to the Bottom, she is "accompanied by a plague of robins" (Morrison 77). Her arrival is instantly marred by a curse, making it easier for her to be scapegoated. The longer she stays, the worse her condemnation by the community becomes. When Sula decides to put Eva into the nursing home, they "said Sula was a roach", and following her affair with Jude they "said she was a bitch" (97). The people even forgot their own "easy ways" and became focused solely on Sula's (97). Quickly, there becomes a consensus in the community that Sula had done a wrong that is unforgivable. Further, the people begin to focus only on Sula's wrongdoing and forget about their own faults, regardless of how similar; thus, the community fully projects their transgressions onto her.

Their reasons for scapegoating Sula go beyond what she personally has done, as the people begin twisting things that happened around her into her personal wrongdoings. The people in the Bottom "remembered the plague of robins that announced her return, and the tale of her watching Hannah burn" (Morrison 97). The blame put on Sula relates to things that she is in no way connected to, like the robins, and stories that are speculation, like that of Hannah death. Due to the stigma created by the community, Sula becomes isolated, as "minds were closed to her" in the community (97). An "us versus them" attitude is created, with the "them" being solely Sula. The people also begin to project their wrongdoings onto Sula, especially Nel. Following Sula's affair with Jude, Nel

"moves from idealizing Sula to projecting onto her" (Fetters 46). Though Nel later on realizes what she has done, in the moment she allows Sula to function as her source of all blame and wrongdoing, just as the rest of the town has done (Morrison 146).

Though Sula suffers from being scapegoated, many of the people in the Bottom find themselves benefiting. The more they think about her wrongdoings, the more they change "in accountable yet mysterious ways" (Morrison 102). The people in the Bottom begin to clean up their acts so that they become less relatable to Sula. They begin to take care of each other, refrain from their bad behaviors, and repair what they believe is broken in their lives. Now that they have projected all of their wrongdoings onto Sula, it is imperative that they change their ways so they do not resemble their scapegoat. The result of this is the beginning of Sula's scapegoating; it is a figurative exile, like that experienced by the goat in Leviticus. Although she is not run out of town, Dwyer observes that, "exile can be internal, being separated from the common life, one's human dignity and social legitimacy denied" (16). Sula finds herself exiled within the Bottoms rather than being sent out, but she is nonetheless exiled and chosen by the people of the Bottoms to be their scapegoat.

The next two stages of the literary scapegoat progression involve advocacy for the scapegoat—both from an authority figure and from the scapegoat herself. Arguably, there is no clear authority figure actively advocating for Sula. However, there are more subtle moments throughout the book. Though the people isolate Sula and create a void between her and them, they are very cautious of how they do it. It would be much easier for them if Sula left rather than continuing to live in the Bottom, yet "they would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back" because of

their "secret awareness of him" (Morrison 102). The people's fear of a higher being protects Sula from true exile, providing her with an authority that protects her. The other person that advocates for Sula is Eva, her grandmother. Though not high in authority, Eva is an elder and generally respected within the Bottom. When Nel goes to visit her at the nursing home, Eva begins to ask her about what happened when Chicken Little died. Though Nel insists it was all Sula's doing, Eva tells her, "'You, Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you?'" (145). Eva calls out Nel's quickness to blame Sula and project her guilt onto her, showing that she is advocating for Sula in a subtle way. Eva brings to light how Nel has scapegoated Sula and why it is problematic.

Though Sula is advocated for by others, she is also not afraid to advocate for herself through her actions and her words. Despite the people in the Bottom working hard to isolate Sula and make her feel unwanted, she does not hide herself. She continues to go to social gatherings such as church dinners, and she continues to live her life the way she pleases through her relationships with men in the community such as Ajax. Though they continue to exile Sula, she continues to live her life as she wishes. Sula also verbalizes her advocacy with Nel in their final conversation. When Nel visits Sula on her death bed, Sula expresses little remorse for her affair with Jude, which frustrates Nel. When Nel gives up and decides to leave, Sula questions who was good in the situation, and tells Nel, "'maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me'" (Morrison 126). Though Nel has been convinced that Sula was the clear one in the wrong and she was right, Sula's questioning "confronts that narcissistic, self-righteousness head-on" (Fetters 46). Sula refuses to be complacent in her own scapegoating, and her actions make this clear.

The final aspect of the progression of the literary scapegoat is the scapegoat being extolled and redeemed. Sula's redemption is slow and quiet, and does not come until after her death. The people continue to isolate Sula and project onto her up until her death, and even when she dies they "felt that either because Sula was dead or just after she was dead a brighter day was dawning" (Morrison 129). It is not until time passes that Sula's redemption begins to come. Following the relief of Sula's death, "a falling away, a dislocation was taking place….a restless irritability took hold" (131). Though projecting their issues onto Sula and scapegoating her provided temporary relief, the people in the Bottom are now forced to come to terms with their wrongdoings and shortcomings. They begin to be less kind to each other, and stop putting in the effort to be better and correct their bad behaviors. It becomes clear that Sula's death has brought them back full circle, and their scapegoating of her did not provide the fix they desired. It also becomes clear that the issues they had projected onto Sula were not hers, so the community is forced to confront their problems head-on.

Though this realization is felt amongst everyone, Nel feels it most strongly. For years Nel convinced herself that Sula was the one to blame for everything that had happened, whether that be Chicken Little's death, the affair, or the end of their friendship. However, following her visit with Eva, Nel can no longer project her guilt onto Sula. Writing on this moment, Fetters says:
Nel finally comes to terms with that which she has projected onto Sula all these years: 'But it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped. She hadn't wondered about that in years. "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?' (170). Realizing not just her

complicity in Chicken Little's murder, but the joy she got from seeing him die, the 'tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation,' which she had always claimed was 'maturity, serenity and compassion,' (171) she finally comes to terms with the fact maybe it wasn't Sula who was bad; maybe, just maybe, it was she (48).

It finally becomes clear to Nel that she had put all of her shame, guilt, and wrongdoings onto Sula instead of taking ownership of them. This realization is deepened at the end of the book, when Nel thinks of Sula, and becomes aware of how much she has missed her (Morrison 149). Although Nel was actively scapegoating Sula following the affair, Sula is now redeemed in Nel's eyes as she realizes what she has done to Sula.

Sula and the Scapegoating of Black Women

The need for the people in the Bottom to project all of their problems onto one woman reflects the ways in which our society projects big issues onto black women. The most prominent example of this was Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report, *The Negro Family*. His goal was to examine and determine the roots of black struggle in America, but his rhetoric created a feeling of blame directed towards a specific group; black women. With a significant amount of black families being headed by women, Moynihan discusses the idea of the black matriarchy and how it contributed to the daily struggle of blacks. Regardless of his intentions, Moynihan's report placed black women at the center of national issues, and many Americans bought into the idea that the black matriarch was the one to blame for the poverty, violence, and incarceration rates among blacks, because they were the ones raising the families. The issues that blacks faced in the 1960s were much deeper than if black women were

heading the house or not, but Moynihan's report ignored all other potential factors and projected these issues solely onto black women, similar to how all of the issues the people in the Bottom had were projected onto Sula.

In a more recent example, a famous midwife, Ina May Gaskin, was asked about how systemic racism relates to the high infant and maternal mortality rates amongst blacks, and in response Gaskin stated that the real issue was black women overdosing, and black women should combat high mortality by praying or growing food (*Yes* Magazine). Gaskin's comments are problematic because they again project larger societal problems onto a group of people who have very little control over these problems. Rather than acknowledge the ways poverty and high stress rates effect black mothers, she placed all the blame on black mothers and portrayed them as incompetent. The issue she raises about overdose is a valid one, yet it is not the sole reason mortality rates are high. Just as Sula is neither wholly innocent nor wholly guilty, neither are all black mothers. Sula's story becomes a reflection of the bigger problem of black women being expected to carry the burden of societal issues that are projected onto them. Once those issues are projected, society condemns black women for their incompetency, just as Sula is judged for her wrongdoings. It follows, then, that just as we become empathetic for Sula as the story progresses, we must also empathize with and recognize how back women and other groups are scapegoated in our daily lives.

In Toni Morrison's *Sula*¸ Sula Peace models Girard's concept of the literary scapegoat. The complexity of her character and situation makes her neither wholly innocent nor wholly guilty, but rather stuck in a middle ground. However, for the people in the Bottom, she becomes the ultimate scapegoat whom they can project onto and then reject. Although this works short term, Sula

is eventually redeemed at the end of the book when the people are forced to come to terms with their wrongdoings and realize that Sula was not the root of their problems. Sula being scapegoated by her entire community reflects the way that black women find themselves being scapegoated in society today. As we empathize with Sula, we must also empathize with others who are scapegoated rather than project onto them.

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