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The Ties That Bind: Female Friendship and Sexuality in the African American Women's Novel

Maggie Malin

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Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has been one of the most popular assigned novels across a scope of high school and college classes for the last forty years. It lays the foundation in many ways for the African American women's novel in its direct discussions of independence and self-discovery as well as sex and love as it follows protagonist Janie Crawford (who takes on three other surnames over the course of the book from a series of husbands of varying quality) on her search for a love that will fulfill her. Nearly forty years later, contemporary novelist Toni Morrison released *Sula*, an intergenerational story of Black womanhood and a more implicit quest of self-understanding through relationships with others. Both books are notable for their bold depictions of female sexual autonomy and emphasis on the self-defining importance of the pursuit of sexual fulfillment. Both authors also give their protagonists a friend—Pheoby to Janie and Nel to Sula—who is equally integral to each woman's development into and understanding of herself.

In ways big and small, *Sula* is Morrison's side of a conversation with Hurston across a thirty-six-year gap. As early as the opening paragraph, she makes reference to a grove of "pear trees" as a tribute to the femininely flowery and erotically charged pear tree metaphor in the opening act of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Morrison 3). In many ways, the novels are similar, as they each follow a young woman growing up and searching for love and purpose in a world stacked against them. Tonally, though, the books differ. Whereas Hurston is something of a romantic idealist, full of hope that her Black female protagonist's quest for understanding and peace may be reflected in reality, Morrison responds to her ideas of companionship and sexual

autonomy with a more cynical lens befitting of the intersectional struggles of Black womanhood. In *Sula*, Morrison's more cynical stance on Hurston's lovingly hopeful ideas of sex, friendship, and self-discovery work not to diminish them but rather to empower them further amidst conflict.

Both books follow their protagonists from adolescence into adulthood, and the main threads of each journey arise from the women's sexual awakenings, both represented by a metaphor of nature. The more serene of the two, Hurston's protagonist Janie first experiences orgasm in a flowery passage about the pollination of the blooms of a pear tree (Hurston 11). The moment is full of language like "sanctum," "creaming," "frothing with delight," and "marriage"—language that evokes softness, care, joy, and love. Janie comes to understand sexual fulfillment as just that—fulfillment, or a manifestation of an intentional delight. The fulfillment comes from herself and empowers her to seek out a love that will fulfill her in the same way. Black feminist poet Audre Lorde writes that "[o]nce we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness" (Lorde 54–55). Janie's sexual awakening instigates her quest for a love that can live up to her standards of pleasure, which varies in its success.

Meanwhile, Morrison takes a starker stance on girls' sexual coming-of-age. Protagonist Sula and best friend Nel wrap their minds around sex for the first time while digging in the "bare" dirt with "undressed" twigs. The girls plunge their sticks "rhythmically and intensely into the earth" with impatience and little regard for the implications of their actions (Morrison 58). They then fill the hole with debris and bury it as a "grave" without saying a word to each other (59). There is a driven solemnity to their process, which is notably penetrative—the girls take on the phallic perspective. They dig with an almost angry purpose that they can't identify but that they have an unspoken intent of. They open a hole and then immediately defile and

bury it. The action is all too representative of the male perception of women as vessels of their pleasure and bearers of their pain. The fact that this perspective is Sula and Nel's first encounter with intercourse is an establishment by Morrison of the dark truth of sexual autonomy. Morrison argues that even young women, who arguably deserve a peaceful solo pear-tree awakening, live in a world where sex is understood through the male perspective, a self-centered viewpoint rooted in personal gain. The nature metaphor she chooses to use acknowledges Hurston's representation of sex as something natural and earthly, but functions more as a preemptive cautionary tale than a celebration.

As established, *Their Eyes* puts forth a more hopeful and uplifting view of the female world than *Sula*, though this difference flips in regards to the protagonists' matriarchs' perspectives on sex, and how those ideas are received by their daughters. Sula's mother Hannah is a "daylight lover," borrowing men for her pleasure regardless of their marital status, emerging from her dalliances "looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier," and teaching "Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (Morrison 44). In the world of *Their Eyes*, though, when Janie's grandmother and guardian Nanny finds out that Janie has gotten her "womanhood on [her]," her only instruction regarding her granddaughter's changing body and mind is that she "wants to see [her] married right away" (Hurston 12). The only way she knows for Janie to be safe in her adult womanhood is for her to "marry off decent like" (13). Both Nanny, a formerly enslaved woman, and her daughter, Janie's estranged mother, faced sexual exploitation and abuse; that pain is Nanny's only context for sex. Even knowing this family history, Nanny's stern fear of unweddedness does not reconcile with Janie's believed equation of sex, marriage, and love.

So Janie is taught that sex is to be feared and Sula is taught that it is an everyday part of life, and in this one aspect it is Hurston rather than Morrison who writes the more cynical viewpoint. However, both

protagonists proceed to pursue their own sexual freedoms, and it is in the reactions of the world around each woman that Hurston's hopefulness and Morrison's hesitance prevail again. In *Their Eyes*, after Janie's second and most directly oppressive husband Jody dies, Janie punctuates her grieving process by "let[ting] down her plentiful hair" and going about her life with it "in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (Hurston 87, 89). Janie's hair is established as a symbol of her sexual appeal and thus her sexual autonomy; Jody insists that she tie it up and hide it while she works in his store, and chronologically later the people of Eatonville criticize Janie for letting her hair swing "down her back lak some young gal [sic]" despite being forty years old (55, 2). When Jody dies, Janie is free to make her own choices about her appearance, granting herself her first bodily autonomy since her orgasm under the pear tree. With her hair down carefreely, Janie is able to redefine her life as an individual, and then fall in love on her own terms. This course of action is a prime example of the romantic and hopeful tone that Hurston promotes—something fresh and empowering for stories about Black women, after generations of slave narratives and oppressive seduction novels. Hurston writes of sexual autonomy as Black female freedom, untethered to whiteness or maleness and celebrated thusly.

Sula's sexual autonomy is more explicit than Janie's, which Morrison uses to explore the unpleasant reality of the demonization of female sexuality. When Sula returns to the Bottom as an adult, she chooses to fulfill her sexual appetite not unlike her mother did, going "to bed with men as frequently as she c[an]" (Morrison 122). She takes sex as her best opportunity to "find what she [is] looking for: misery and the ability to feel deep sorrow," and the town construes her as a "pariah" for her tendency to "[try other women's husbands] out and [discard] them" (122, 115). In this narrative, sexual freedom is destructive, both to Sula herself and to the people around her. There is no reward for her autonomy, and in fact her neighborhood of the Bottom becomes a more adverse place as the people of the town begin

to define their own morality in opposition to her promiscuity (115). Morrison's distrust of our societal structure to see sexual freedom, especially of women, as anything other than sinful emerges for a moment to the forefront of the narrative. But Morrison wants to be clear that there is strength in Sula's actions, and does so through Sula's emotional intentionality.

Unlike Janie, a lifelong romantic, Sula isn't looking for emotional connection to accompany her sexual pursuits—instead she revels in the grief of her lack of it, and lives for the “utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own strength and limitless power” (123). Audre Lorde would argue that even this deep connection to “the solitude [Sula finds] in that desperate terrain” which “had never admitted the possibility of other people” grants Sula a strength that she can use to her advantage (Morrison 123). Lorde advocates for women to connect with their own eroticism, a self-fulfilling passion which she claims originates with sexual pleasure but can and should extend to all aspects of a woman's life. “[A]s we begin to recognize our deepest feelings,” Lorde argues in a 1984 essay on the subject, “we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society” (Lorde 58). In her emotional revelations about sex, Sula walks a fine line between this empowering application of fulfillment and the pornographic opposite, which Lorde describes as “sensation without feeling” (54). Sula chooses men indiscriminately and uses their sex to intentionally stimulate emptiness, which certainly seems like sensation without the affirmative kind of emotional feeling we might now associate with a healthy sex life. Her exploration of her autonomy would align with Lorde's derogatory and unfulfilling definition of pornography if she were not so attached to the solo power she gleans from her pursuits. It is this acquaintance with herself, with what she wants to feel and how she knows she can reliably feel it, that allows her “to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within [herself]” (Lorde

58). Morrison takes a darker twist on Hurston's quest for erotic fulfillment, but she still puts her leading woman in the cockpit with a strong knowledge of what she's after and how she can go about getting it. Sula's newfound responsibility to and for herself, as somber as it might be, opens her up to the sexual experience that brings her to her first and only male love, as far as the narrative is concerned.

At some point in each protagonist's journey, she takes a lover who comes close to fulfilling her desires—though both authors recognize that men are not the peak of female fulfillment. In *Their Eyes*, Janie meets her beloved Tea Cake after two unhappy marriages in which she is forced into the role of a domestic doormat, and in the most recent of which her sexual passion was quelled to the point where “[s]he wasn't petal-open anymore” (Hurston 71). Tea Cake is something new—he combs Janie's hair, teaches her how to play checkers, and encourages her to speak her mind. He is attracted to her regardless of her relative seniority. His tender and amiable courtship paints him as “a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring,” thus reawakening Janie to her sexual potential (106). Hurston writes him as a near-perfect lover—as close to a success in Janie's quest as she has experienced so far. No man is perfect; Tea Cake disappears for a short time and squanders Janie's emergency funds on a party a few towns over, and his plan to win it back relies on gambling (122–25). While by today's standards this sounds irresponsible at best and financially abusive at worst, Tea Cake and Janie's care and trust run so deeply both ways that the emotional strain is resolved. Tea Cake leaves, but he comes back; he takes Janie's money, but he delivers on his promise to win it back, taking Janie along for the adventure. There is a hopeful romance to their conflict resolution that Hurston perpetuates throughout their relationship.

Sula finds a good lover too—the man she knows as Ajax, who catcalls her and Nel as young teenagers, being “the first sexual excitement she'd known,” and who returns to her life “bearing gifts” during her sexual tour of the Bottom after her affair with Nel's husband

(Morrison 50, 130, 125). As he courts her and she regularly enjoys sex with him, Sula begins “to discover what possession [is]” (131). She expresses her newly-developed domestic feelings for Ajax with a clean house and a nice dinner, and in this homely display of affection she scares him off and he leaves her the next day (134). Morrison asks Hurston to consider what she might think of as a more realistic stance on men—specifically Black men of the early twentieth century, who continued to grapple with what personal freedom looked like in a post-Reconstruction era America. Ajax enjoys wooing Sula, but he fears any implication that he may lose some kind of freedom by committing himself to her. This insecurity is only implied; Morrison writes from Sula’s perspective to emphasize the resulting empty pain that Ajax leaves in his wake. Unlike Tea Cake, Ajax never returns; though he was good at it, his courtship was for his own pleasure alone, with no regard for how he might truly affect Sula. Where Hurston expresses a belief in a healthy, lasting, and sexually fulfilling relationship, Morrison paints a realistic (if cynical) picture of the rise and fall of hope that accompanies infatuation, and how the decline of that romantic hope may be exacerbated by different perceptions of commitment and possession.

While sex and courtship play a prominent part in each protagonist’s life, the emotional core of each narrative is rooted in female friendship. Morrison and Hurston agree on the erotic—that is to say, unrestrainedly passionate—power of these friendships. Each woman is defined by her friendship with another woman that explicitly fulfills her in a way that no male connection has. As her tone tends to be, Hurston’s perspective on her leading friendship—that between Janie and townsperson Pheoby Watson—is less printed with tragedy and more imbued with an empowering sense of romance. Interdisciplinary feminist writer Carla Kaplan contends that Pheoby fulfills Janie’s quest for erotic connection simply by being a good listener to the story of her life. To an extent, Janie struggles with freedom of speech with each of the men in her life, but “Pheoby’s hungry listening” actively “help[s] Janie to tell her story,” to define herself on her own terms, uninterrupted

(Hurston 10). The act of listening itself is innocuous, but it aligns with Lorde's proposed function of "form[ing] a bridge" that results from the inherently erotic act of "sharing...joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (Lorde 56). Pheoby is there to receive Janie exactly as Janie presents herself, without bending to any roles or expectations, which is a first for Janie. "Only in telling her story to Pheoby," emphasizes Kaplan, "does [Janie] fulfill her quest for the satisfaction she beheld under the pear tree" (Kaplan 138). Morrison extrapolates from this friendship for Sula and Nel, but even her cynical lens results in a similar powerful catharsis.

Morrison acknowledges, as Hurston does, that women bring a certain vitality into other women's lives that is not matched by men. When Sula arrives back to the Bottom after years of school and travel, Nel bubbles with affection for the way Sula radiates life and definition and girlish humor. With her childhood best friend back in town, Nel is able to rekindle "a bright and easy affection" with her husband Jude—a previously lost "playfulness" attributed to Sula's reemergence in Nel's life that is "reflected in [Nel and Jude's] lovemaking," underscoring the erotic nature of Nel and Sula's bond (Morrison 95). After Sula's affair with Jude, Nel enters a deep grief for the loss of her husband that she cannot seem to reach the climax of. It is only after Sula's death, twenty-five years later, that Nel realizes it was the loss of her pure friendship with Sula she was grieving for, and she is finally able to release her mourning cry (Morrison 174). The language Morrison employs during Nel's cathartic revelation—"Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things"—mirrors the exact language used at the beginning of Nel's grief cycle when she cannot reach emotional release—"The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of green things enveloped her" (174, 108). The earthly imagery also calls back to Nel and Sula's joint sexual revelation in the dirt beneath the trees, once again establishing the women's bond as erotic. Morrison looks at the erotic nature of female friendship as one that allows for a richer, more fulfilling experience of the world. Nel's epiphany of her love for Sula,

“[w]hen released from its intense and constrained pellet,...flows through and colors [her] life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens...[her] experience,” as Lorde’s personal experience with the erotic does (Lorde 57). With *Sula* being the kernel of Nel’s grief instead of Jude, Morrison emphasizes the inextricable impact of the women’s friendship.

It is notable that the thing that remains fulfilling, the thing that empowers the characters at the start of the book and at the end, is not the men or the sex or even the understanding of oneself, but instead the friendship between two women. In all of Morrison’s overall distrust of circumstance and other people and systemic disadvantage, she responds to Hurston’s picture of strength and self-definition through friendship with a fulfilling and defining friendship of her own. Though fraught with conflict in adulthood, *Sula* and Nel provide the same function for each other that Pheoby does for Janie. Not only do they define themselves through each other in a more circumstantially equal way than they can with their male lovers, but they grow from each other as well, because of their shared experiences as women aging side by side. Morrison agrees with Hurston about many of her points regarding the power of sexuality, the significance of autonomy, and the erotically fulfilling impact of friendship. She writes from a different time—a post-civil rights movement America that calls for a diligence for the details of oneself and a distrust of the way life is set up to exploit those details—whereas Hurston wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, a time of Black hope and liberation expressed through art. As the world evolves, Black women’s roles in it fight to evolve too; through it all their one guarantee has been each other.

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