Critical Theory
African American critical theory is one of the most diverse modes of interpretation to explore in literary works. Because of its history, subject, and interpretation, African American critical theory is equally complex and, often times, confusing. The complexity lies within the foundational structures of race, class, and sex that have existed for generations in our country and which forms a unique intersectionality. It’s also confusing at times because interpretation from an African American standpoint can be new and uncomfortable to many people who have not experienced diversity in their reading material. It’s almost like learning a foreign language: at times difficult, yet once understood, revelations and insight are new awakenings to a world around us which we previously were asleep in. Denial of it’s very existence is detrimental to the overall history and comprehension of America, as Toni Morrison confirms that “a criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only “universal” but also “race-free” risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist” (“Playing” 12). The inclusion and/or the absence of African American references in texts are both equally as meaningful and the acknowledgement that this critical theory holds immense power for our everyday comprehension is the first step to unearthing this dynamic outlook.

What can be accomplished by understanding African American critical theory? For one, the more knowledge we have of other people and different cultures, the more tolerant we are of everyone around us. Learning this theory, specifically, allows us to dig deep within ourselves for the questions and answers that shape who we are, individually, and what we’ve become as a society. Some of these new recognitions may be distressing and cumbersome to navigate, but are well worth the journey into ourselves. Using the novel Sula by Toni Morrison as an example, African American critical theory can be applied in order to dive deeper into the text and extract its various meanings. As a Black female writer, Morrison offers not only insight and context from an African American point of view, but also gives a detailed perspective of life, love, and community in the eyes of a Black woman. “Morrison... emphasizes the interconnection of community stability and individual survival. The two values coexist in a state of tension; neither deserves to be emphasized one above the other” (Harding 103). In order to understand what Morrison’s intent was, and the messages she chose to tell in her novel, the foundation of African American critical theory must be understood.

A main component of African American critical theory is the pervasive undercurrent that deals with and explores racism, both institutionalized – “racist policies and practices by which a society operates” (Tyson 361) – and internalized – “psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates people of color to believe in white superiority” (Tyson 362). Sula, the female protagonist of Morrison’s novel, encounters institutionalized racism on the outside, particularly during the time she was away from home and trying to make a life traveling around and associating with primarily white communities. She also exhibits signs of internalized racism, where prejudices against herself and of her own people are seen from
time to time throughout the novel. Her outlook on the community in the Bottom, which she left behind at one point, is a mixture of sympathy, commitment, and pity.

Stemming from these avenues of racist complexity is double consciousness, or double vision which, according to Tyson is “the awareness of belonging to two conflicting cultures” (362), namely African and European. This duality is seen in Sula as she experiences being torn between the Bottom and the “outside world” (i.e. the white community) and can also be seen as “the theme of the divided self, woman split in two (which is closely akin to double consciousness)” (Washington 209). Juxtaposed against each other, these two cultures often compete against each other, particularly within the individual who is torn between the two, or at least must function between both worlds. Does one choose one culture over the other and, if so, when and for which reasons? Questions like these must be asked in order to extrapolate the meaning behind the actual term. Double consciousness holds no weight unless given context and a means in which to analyze and compare it to actual situations. In African American critical theory, the personal is most definitely political.

An additional component to this critical theory, aside from the previous terms, is that it also requires a certain knowledge of African culture and folklore. Many interpretations can be complimented with African tales and many themes are prevalent in both variations of text. What seems to be extremely important to remember is that in African culture, “the welfare of the community always [takes] precedence over individual gain” (Tyson 367). In Sula, the community of the Bottom looks unfavorably upon the seemingly selfish and nonconforming Sula who chose to wander and find her own path instead of taking the path of her mother and grandmother and all the other women in the community. Sula’s best friend, Nel Wright, chastises Sula for her nonconformity, saying, “You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t”(Morrison, “Sula” 142). Instead of becoming a part of the Bottom, Sula distanced herself from it, creating a wedge of alienation between herself and everyone else. The hostility given to Sula because of her choices is evident in the deterioration of her friendship with Nel Wright, her estrangement from her own grandmother, Eva, and the general mistrust and suspicions of the rest of the community. The circumstances Sula found herself in, as well as the choices she made for herself and the resulting hostility she encountered for them, portrays the dynamic sense of family that is expected from everyone in the Bottom. This is evident in many different texts by African American writers in which the collective whole is considered more important than a single person within the community.

Some key principles of critical race theory, or African American theory, that are particularly relevant to my novel and which Tyson urges to keep in mind when deconstructing African American literary works include Everyday Racism, The Social Construction of Race, Intersectionality, and Voice of Color. These tenets make up part of the foundation on which the understanding of this theory is built. Analyzing and contextualizing these principles allow for a broader comprehension of the discipline which will, in turn, create a deeper understanding of African American texts and authors’ intent.
Everyday Racism refers to the inherent and deeply rooted racism which pervades our culture on personal, political, and economic levels. This type of racism can be seen in every avenue including, but not limited to, schools and classrooms, social organizations, common civility, housing, the workplace, and restaurants. The people in the Bottom were systematically placed there because of discrimination. As a matter of fact, the Bottom came out of a “joke” played by a white farmer on his Black slave, where the slave was given Bottom land and told that it was “rich and fertile… it’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is” (Morrison, “Sula” 5). Being tricked out of receiving desirable and fertile land, the Black slave (and his subsequent settlers) were forced to live their lives under hostile conditions. In addition, they were barred from entering white establishments down in the valley of Medallion, as well as denied decent jobs and wages. What can be seen as equally destructive in regards to Everyday Racism is “white people’s denial that racism exists or has occurred in a particular instance” (Tyson 370). It’s become so prevalent in our culture that oftentimes this is practiced without the white perpetrators even realizing it which then leads to widespread ignorance and intolerance.

The Social Construction of Race is particularly important in understanding the spectrum of power vs. skin color that has continued to exist in our society, as well as in many other societies as well. Race, and its meanings, has been socially constructed to empower and disempower individuals as well as classes of peoples in order to serve the interest of those who hold the most power. The Social Construction of Race has also been somewhat fluid over time, allowing for an increase in interpretation as to who is considered “white” and therefore has access to power. On the other hand, this fluidity has meant almost nothing to those who have dark skin, as they have been systematically and continually labeled as “Black” and therefore have restricted access to power. Due to this social construction, the city of Medallion was able to exploit the people who lived in the Bottom and, thereby, held all of the economic and political power in the area. Considering that race has no actual scientific basis for the claims in its social construction, its quite evident that the introduction of race and its meanings has been developed and shaped by groups of people who are able to benefit from its hierarchy.

Intersectionality refers to a diverse complexity of identity values which comprise most of our internal and external frameworks, such as “race intersect[ing] with class, sex, sexual orientation, political orientation, and personal history” (Tyson 376). These components of our overall “makeup” are uniquely our own and offer up a variety of possible multi-layered oppressions. Building upon The Social Construction of Race, Intersectionality connects all forms of discrimination and, depending on how many intersections an individual has, the more or less discriminated against they can, and will, be. Women, lesbians, gays, and non-whites are all oppressed in some form or another.

Sula
When any of these identities overlap, it’s an additional target of discrimination. Going against the grain, “Sula is frightening because racial and sexual circumstance has determined that she will have no way of expressing her brilliant inner fire, yet she absolutely refuses to settle for the “colored woman’s” lot of marriage, child-raising, labor and pain” (Bell 23). In Sula, members of the Bottom community, depending on their various intersectional qualities, are given either more or less clout and control over local affairs and, as we can see, “Culture’s
multiple divisions result in a complexity of intersections” (Harding 6). There is even a socially constructed linear flow of Intersectionality and how it relates to hierarchy and oppression, starting at the top (those who hold the power) being rich, white, heterosexual males and ending at the bottom (those with none of the power) being poor, Black, lesbian women. Scattered between these two polar opposites are all others and, varying upon their level of intersectionalities, they are positioned as constructed for maximum benefit of power for those at the top.

In particular reference to African American literary works, Voice of Color is what cements all of these somewhat abstract concepts surrounding race, privilege, and power and allows for first-hand interpretation and experience. Logically, we can understand the truths surrounding this experience and that “perceptions of differences between people are real, differences the word “race” attempts to define, differences which affect how the social system of the dominant culture operates” (Heinert 7). The concept behind this principle is that “minority writers and thinkers are generally in a better position than white writers and thinkers to write and speak about race and racism because they experience racism directly” (Tyson 377). What gives Voice of Color its weight among literary theorists is the logical notion that those who have experienced socially constructed racial oppression have learned discrimination through its very oppression and are therefore qualified to speak of such acquisitions. Sula is an example of this important concept to literary theory because “Morrison’s exquisite language and subject matter embody Black experience in a way rarely achieved by Black novelists” (Smith 22). Voice of Color opens up the door for ethnic writers to receive recognition of their experiences and perspectives; it gives them a voice in which to be heard.

Much of the basis of critical race and African American theory is imperative in beginning to scratch the surface of reading literary works in the light of African American literary critique or criticism. Sula is a great jumping off point to continue the analyzation of this literary critique further as “[Morrison] places herself as a creative artist on the divide between two communities, tracing the origins, the evolution, and the consequences of the racial fracture in American society” (Harding171). Tyson defines learning from these new perspectives as being critical to understanding race, as well as human relations, stating “the quest to understand human relations… is the reason why most authors write as well as the reason why most readers read” (384). It’s impossible to understand the racial layers embedded deep within, and sometimes completely excluded from, texts without being aware of their existence.

There are several themes which Morrison chose to explore in her novel Sula and which tie directly back into the main issues and area of focus in African American theory. Morrison’s choice to deeply probe into issues such as intra-racial racism, internalized racism, and the intersections of racism, classism, and sexism is, in its own way, proof of the African American struggle to persevere through life’s negative experiences. The characters in Sula share a variety of these issues, sometimes even embodying all of them simultaneously. Many members of the Bottom community openly express racism towards their fellow neighbors and darker skin meant you were targeted far more frequently and more severely. Lighter skinned Blacks regularly taunted and discriminated against darker skinned Blacks, successfully portraying intra-racial racism, as well as internalized racism.
The logical reasoning behind this is that due to the constant and systematic racism practiced by white people, it’s nearly impossible for Black people to avoid internalizing these values of hatred, even for their own people and for themselves. If a person is told often enough that they are less worthy of consideration, opportunity, and quality of life, it’s only a matter of time before they begin to believe it. After years upon years of this type of white guerilla marketing, Black people can also become their own worst enemies, in addition to the white people who continue to perpetuate the racism and discrimination. An example of intra-racial racism at work within the novel can be seen when the people of Medallion “contain evil within Sula, [they] can use her to contain their anger at those evils they are powerless to remedy” (Peterson 57). A certain level of internalized racism and hatred is evident in Sula, as her conflicted sense of identity and community create polar opposites within her internal make-up. When Sula returns to the Bottom, she confides to Nel that “half [Medallion] need [killing]” (Morrison, “Sula” 96), confessing her dislike for the surrounding town and community. It seems that this conflict may be the main reason for Sula to have abandoned the Bottom in search of comfort and identity elsewhere.

Regardless, even within this internalized racism for herself and other Blacks, something compels Sula to return to the Bottom; something pulls her closer to her community and brings her full circle back to the life she once tried to abandon. Upon this return, Sula seems to be serving an important function within the novel which may symbolize life or death for the people of Medallion as they “[identify] Sula as a personification of evil [which] relieves these people of the burden of their own evil and displaces it onto her… They can become good because, in their minds, she has become evil” (Peterson 56).

**Toni Morrison**

Morrison employs both the use of orality and folk motifs as poetics in the structure of her novel, following the literary tradition of many other African American texts. By giving her characters the voice of everyday dialect such as Black Vernacular English (an African American variety of American English), Morrison immediately submerges the reader in new territory; reading her novel forces us to give up our preconceived notions about language and how it shapes and is a product of society. Morrison sets the pace for her novel and we are at her mercy in allowing her to pull and push us along with the use of language and how she’s able to work it into and around the text.

Folk motifs are prominent in Sula, especially in the opening story of Shadrack and his foundation of National Suicide Day. Even in the telling of the folk stories themselves, there are exaggerations, colorful language, and vivid fantastical descriptions which make the illusions come alive. The story of Shadrack seems to be dream-like, even as his days at a mental institution are recounted, “Just as he was about to spread his fingers, they began to grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk all over the tray and the bed” (Morrison, “Sula” 9). This motif is also evident in other colorful accounts being told throughout the novel, such as the drowning of Chicken Little, the strange wind which tore through the Bottom, Hannah Peace burning in the yard fire, the speculative story of Eva Peace’s leg being severed by a train in order to collect on insurance, and the plague of robins which accompanied Sula back to the Bottom.
Another vivid reflection of folk underpinnings in Medallion is the way in which “Sula’s birthmark is a constantly renewed symbolism expressing Sula’s personality as a response to others” (Harding 22). Her birthmark takes on different roles and meanings as it morphs into a variety of shapes specific to the observer as a projection of themselves. The people of Medallion see themselves in Sula and its through their own interpretations of her chameleon-like birthmark that establishes Sula’s presence in their hearts and minds.

Character types can also embody certain folk practices. The matriarch can be seen as Eva Peace, the trickster can arguably be seen as Shadrack, and Sula Peace seems to take on the form of the conjurer (at least to the rest of the Bottom community). Particularly, “Eva’s significance and the significance of her amputated leg are a symbol for the whole Bottom community, “the maiming is emblematic not only of a woman’s sacrifice but also of the whole community’s deprivation” (Harding 4). The residents of the Bottom also heavily rely on storytelling to share and pass down wisdom, as well as create a sense of community together.

As Morrison illustrates in Sula, community and self-identity can sometimes intertwine and clash with one another. Specifically, Black women find themselves in a specific intersectional conflict where they “must negotiate the conflicting requirements of their relationship to the Black community as a whole – their solidarity with Black men against racist oppression – and their relationship to women of all races in an effort to resist sexist oppression” (Tyson 389). Sula is the perfect example of this intersectionality as she finds herself torn in different directions as the different passions which compel her to act also serve to motivate her. The struggle for her own self identity is prevalent throughout the novel, being one of the focal themes in which the story unfolds itself, as “Sula Peace defies cultural stereotypes of femininity… Sula’s life has been decided by the double oppression of race and gender… she has no constructive activity to engage her restless imagination” (Harding 69). The conflict between solidarity among other Blacks and solidarity among other women is unique to Black women, as Black feminists have long pointed out.

Traditional feminism has long overlooked multiculturalism as being a part of the feminist movement, particularly in regards to “women of color, lesbians, and poor, undereducated women” (Tyson 105). This is an important concept to the novel as well since Sula is obviously torn between sexual and racial politics and livelihood, as Morrison seems to be addressing this dilemma in her characterization of Sula and her choices. When Sula leaves the Bottom, speculation arises as to where she had gone, rumors swirling about that she was either in college or assimilating into white society and, most vile, that she was sleeping with white men. Sula’s “only chance for survival lies within the community; outside is the threat of annihilation” (Harding 89). Breaking away from community results in the breakdown of Sula’s character and it is also the beginning of the end for Medallion, for if Sula hadn’t left the Bottom, its destiny wouldn’t have been fulfilled. Regardless, the possible negative explanations for Sula’s disappearance were looked upon unfavorably by the rest of the Bottom community since they all alluded to a possible treason towards the community on her behalf. The exposure of this rip down the middle of Medallion is startling to the community.
Challenging the status quo, “Sula is frightening because racial and sexual circumstance has determined that she will have no way of expressing her brilliant inner fire, yet she absolutely refuses to settle for the “colored woman’s” lot of marriage, child-raising, labor and pain” (Harding 23). Does Sula choose to be an independent, empowered woman or does she choose to fight in the struggle for her race? This question pulls from both African American critical theory as well as ideas from Black feminism. Regarding Sula in its entirety, the story “suggests a positive way of freeing our fettered minds from the oppressive tentacles of a past which, when given neurotic attention, prevents us from progressing and projecting a new vision for ourselves and others interested in a more realistic human existence” (Bell 27).

The Black woman as suppressed artist is also a dominant theme in Sula, as Sula is frequently denied an adequate outlet for her self expressive tendencies, resulting in her “artistic impulses [turning] inward and becom[ing] [a] destructive force in [her] li[fe]” (Washington 210). Sula skips around like a broken record as the rest of Medallion follows the calm flow of a river. Instead of merely accepting what life has handed her, she disrupts a linear course in favor of erratic behavior and an unpredictable path, even disrupting her personal connections along the way. She “becomes destructive to fill the void in her life caused by lack of artistic tools and an outlet for her artistic temperament. She… do[es] whatever she wants regardless of the consequences, acting out all of her unconventional behavior until she is feared and despised by the whole town of Medallion” (Washington 210). The sacrifices made in order for Sula to pursue a life of excitement and spontaneity wreaks havoc in the town and further secludes her from any sense of comforting community. With an increase in her individuality, Sula must also accept an increase in isolation. In order to become fully accepted into the community, she would have to “exhibit a dual allegiance to self and to collectivity” (Harding 87). While other members of Medallion questioned Sula, she, in turn, sought to question and reclaim her past, as well as examine her relationship in whole to the Black community.

If our overall understanding of African American critical theory is correct, we should be able to apply the concepts to every reading with the ability to see through the lens of this theory without our own projections. Through character development, we witness particularly the people of Medallion “grow in complexity in the course of the narrative, who cohere in spite of their inconsistencies, and who seem always to remain partially unrevealed, developing rather than accomplished” (Harding 18). The reason being for this type of character creation is that we are all works in progress; we are all products of our surroundings and are, inevitably, shaped by society and those around us. As a way of providing some sort of answer – some sense of security – within the Bottom, Sula is seen through the lens of this theory as a political personification of the African American experience. Through Sula, the community can be purged of their wrongdoings and “confusing and dangerous as she is, Sula becomes a means of limiting evil, of keeping others good, safe and secure” (Peterson 55). As a critical and complex series of themes in overall African American theory, texts are given new interpretations which help us as readers and members of our own communities to understand our historical make-up. There would be no America without the presence of African Americans and their immense contribution to both historical events and the rich texts created by, and for, them. By using this interpretive literary analysis, we can make significant steps forward in not only understanding the Black experience, but by allowing it to flourish and by becoming a part of it.
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