

The Carnavalesque Versus the African American Dilemma in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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ABSTRACT

Away from European, classical, and Renaissance literature that Mikhail Bakhtin has studied, the aim of this research is to discuss the adequacy and significance of the carnivalesque in the American novel where Toni Morrison's (b.1931) *Sula* (1973) is a case in point. Because the literary mode of the carnivalesque includes communal activities, divisions, eccentricities, and many types of breaking up the norms to allow a new reality to show up and emerge to the surface. This article uses these attributes in order to investigate a variety of themes in relation to the racial segregation issue in *Sula*.

Keywords: Carnavalesque, Race, Bakhtin.

Introduction

Bakhtin maintains that "the sensitive ear will always catch even the most distant echoes of a carnival sense of the world" (*Problems*, 1984, p.107). His statement suggests that each epoch and area used the carnivalesque in ways that reflected their own needs and concerns. In his study of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin refers extensively to the European zone varying between literary works from Russia, Germany, France, Spain and other parts that lie in the European continent only. However, in concentrating on the carnivalesque from Classical literature down to the Renaissance and the nineteenth-century European novel, Bakhtin overlooks its manifestations in modern and contemporary literature.

Because of that particular lacuna, this article aims to examine how the carnivalesque manifests in the modern American novel. In this respect, Linda Hutcheon(1983) argues that Bakhtin appeals more to our world more than any time else because of its salient features of incompleteness and open-endedness (83-84). Though Bakhtin selected a limited range of works and looked suspiciously at the literary production of the modern world, yet for so many reasons his notion of the carnivalesque fits more contemporary genres such as metafiction and the popular forms.

As the founder of the literary mode of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin defines carnival as "a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators" (*Problems*, 1984, p. 122). This suggests that during carnival time all hierarchies and restrictions are denied. In other words, the plebeians who participated in the carnival removed all kinds of social hierarchy because the fundamental characteristic of carnival constitutes escaping the status quo. As such, Bakhtin affirms that carnival "has a universal spirit" because the concern is not one individual but rather the global (*Problems*, 1984, p. 7).

As an African American novelist, Morrison is noted for using her fiction as a platform for dealing with the archetypal dilemma of her race ever since the African slaves set foot on the American soil. Morrison's literary oeuvre highlights issues of painful oppression of African Americans who live in a predominantly white hegemonic society. Through her writing, Morrison asserts that the future of the United States depends on achieving reconciliation between the races; in addition, Morrison believes that African Americans can heal themselves through overcoming the injustices of the past.

In her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" (1988), Morrison argues that art is exclusively Eurocentric,

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signifying the marginalization of the literary works of African Americans and third world writers. As such, Morrison maintains that "Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense" (p. 128-132); its aim is to reject one culture at the expense of another's existence. This policy excludes African Americans from historical narratives and it is the responsibility of novelists as Morrison to bring back their work back to the center. In that context, Morrison aims at giving African Americans a voice that expresses their nightmares. Morrison's *Sula* aims at reinstating the African Americans' voice and their cultural heritage, it equally highlights the racial prejudices that they have endured. *Sula* is a novel that covers the late period of Jim Crow Laws from 1920s and ends in the 1965s. In the text, the narrative traces the development of a black woman's life to reveal the dilemmas that disrupt the lives of the African American community.

Where the carnivalesque in *Sula* is concerned, in the novel's forward, Morrison states that she "wanted to redirect, reinvent the political, cultural, and artistic judgments saved for African American writers" (*Sula*, XIV). She adds that "Outlaw women are fascinating" (*Ibid.*, XVII) and the character of Sula is very much about defying, challenging, and crossing social and corporeal boundaries. These statements reflect that Morrison wants to defy racial and gender boundaries. Thus, as characteristic of the carnivalesque, *Sula* aims at subverting the established norms and generates anarchy out of order in order to redefine reality.

In terms of *Sula*'s elements of the carnivalesque, this chapter highlights them through referring to their counterparts in the Bakhtinian theory. In *Sula*, we come across the carnivalesque division of the "official" and the "unofficial culture" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 66) between the whites and the African Americans, together with the human-animal divides. Next, the discussion provides of the carnivalized communal celebrations of death and joy, as well as the image of fire with its destructive and constructive poles. In addition, the discussion provides a reading of the novel's space from a carnivalesque point of view, the image of the masquerade with the motif of crowning and the decrowning. The analysis of the carnivalesque in *Sula* highlights the female role in the context of the Bakhtinian concept of the grotesque "bodily lower stratum" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 20) with its regenerative aspects, eccentric images, eccentric language, magical realist incidents, and finally doubling characters and scenes. As in modern and postmodern fiction, the fragmentation of narrative time in *Sula* reflects a conflict so that the novel's form reflects its content. In *Sula*, fragmentation is an emblem for the prevailing antagonism between the whites and the African Americans. The racial conflict that pertains to the Bakhtinian division of "official" and "unofficial culture" crystallizes through other instances like the Jim Crow Laws racial manifestations. These laws represent the power of the "official" whites to subjugate African Americans. These laws of segregation function in schools, trains, and many other public places. The whites enforce these laws to remind African Americans of their inferiority all the time as well as their ability to institute laws according to their own benefits. By doing so, the whites maintain the masses under control and oppression.

To illustrate this oppressive situation, Morrison describes the scene of Helene in the train, an episode that perfectly exemplifies the whites' racist system. The train on which Helene and her daughter ride is designed to enforce division and hierarchy between the two races whereby the label "COLORED ONLY" (*Sula*, 20) marks the boundaries that African Americans should not cross. Indeed, the white conductor rushes to redirect Helene to her proper place specified for the black population. Accordingly, the train episode encompasses racial discrimination that reminds every passenger of his proper status just like the "official feasts [where] everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place correspondingly to his position" (*Sula*, 10). Indeed, besides transportation, Morrison portrays places where discrimination becomes visible publically like the white cemetery and the African American one where Chicken Little is buried. Hospitals as well are divided into white and African American spaces.

As citizens of a culture based on divisions, white Americans look at African Americans as animals whereby polarities of the human-animal divides frequently occur in Morrison's text. When the black Chicken Little drowns, for instance, the white man who finds him is disgusted from the scene that he "shook his head in disgust at the kind of

parents who would drown their own children... will those people ever be anything but animals, fit for nothing but substitutes for mules, only mules didn't kill each other the way niggers did" (*Sula*, 63). The quote clearly explains that the dividing line between the human and the animal is so slight and African Americans are considered worse than "mules."

In the issue of the animal-human divide brings to mind the colonial concept of Otherness that results from the colonial gaze at colonized subjects. In a study of Otherness in the context of the connection between the circus and carnivals, TanjaSchwalm (2006) argues that "One aspect the carnival shares with the circus is the blurring of human-animal boundaries... It can indeed be said that the experience of carnival is like living within a different reality altogether. This reality is characterized by the combination of paradoxes "(84). In fact, the novel indicates that there is a degradation of human value whereby some races are considered inferior just on the basis of the skin color. The racial scene suggests that the oppressive situation of African Americans resembles a circus where the white men come to watch the show of degradation and animalism they inflict upon others.

The impact of the whites' gaze on African Americans is destructive as it makes them really believe they are like animals. The narrative indicates that "old women [African Americans] who worried about such things as bad blood mixtures and knew that the origins of a mule and a mulatto were one and the same" (*Sula*, 52). These "old women," Morrison refers to, are blacks and the impact of the whites' prejudices and labels on them is so great to the extent that prevents them from envisioning a better future. In other words, the race of African Americans' descend into animalism reflects the gaze of the whites towards them and its great psychological effects on them.

The racial conflict in the novel that parallels the Bakhtinian division of "official" and "unofficial culture" appears constantly during many instances throughout *Sula*. Indeed, Morrison predominantly evokes divisions and oppositions all along the story line. Oppositional thinking dominates the minds of the whites and the African Americans to expand the rift between them and create sharp divisions. As such, polar thinking makes assimilation very difficult if not impossible. The opposition between upper and bottom, male and female, rich and poor, beginning and end, and most importantly black and white among other divisions disappear if the inhabitants of Medallion and American citizens at large cross which creates a just and a better future for all races, classes, and genders.

Given the racial antagonisms, Morrison includes carnivalesque scenes in the Bottom that aim at defying white hegemony. As an analogy of marketplace carnivals, the community of the Bottom holds an annual celebration of the National Suicide Day. This celebration, in particular, is held to remind people of death. In the non-carnival life, death cannot be celebrated because it represents an ordeal, but the carnivalesque perception of the world permits opposites like death and celebration to meet and mingle. As such, the carnivalesque aims at erasing oppositional thinking or what Bakhtin calls "the logic of opposites" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 309) which ruins all possibility of creating a better life. Rita A. Bergenholtz (1999) also argues that "Opposition engenders competition, hierarchy, and taxonomy" (5) which the carnival aims to remove.

The novel entails the carnivalesque atmosphere from the very beginning as it entangles carnival activities of the communal all along the narrative plot. Like the carnivalesque which is much more concerned with the communal more than the individual, the protagonist Sula is not the only participant in generating this particular atmosphere of the novel. Indeed, many characters take part in the show of events that occurs like Eva, Hannah, Nel, and Shadrack. The characters, their stories, and their actions manifest various characteristics of the carnivalesque that clarify many of Sula's fictional concerns, where the story of Shadrack forms a case in point.

In the novel Shadrack is a war veteran, who returns home traumatized and injured both physically and mentally because of the atrocities he has seen in World War One. In order to remind people of death, Shadrack institutes the National Suicide Day on each third day of January. Initially, the Bottom community is astonished that Shadrack should suggest such a celebration, but with time, the celebration of the National Suicide Day becomes a national day that resembles carnival feasts where people unite in a festive atmosphere, and use impolite language.

As during carnivals, where people celebrate temporary freedom from rigid hierarchal rules, the Bottom community

likes using "curses" that liberate them from the restrictions of the official culture. The participants enjoy this break from daily routines and the hardships that they endure all the time. The narrative demonstrates that this celebration becomes an integral component in the life of African Americans who live in the Bottom (*Sula*, 16). For this reason, Morrison describes it as a "holiday" (*Sula*, 15).

Another carnivalized scene that stresses the carnivalesque atmosphere of the novel pertains also to the combination of death and joy and takes place when Nel and her mother return from their New Orleans trip. Nel sits in her bed while she recalls "the disgust on the face of the dead woman and the sound of the funeral drums" (*Sula*, 28). In carnival tradition, the beating of drums occurs in marriages, and other happy occasions that imply reversal elements, whereby Bakhtin refers to the drum as "the bridal drum" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 203). Drums in the novel, however, are used to announce death. This opposition forms the carnivalesque characteristic of reversing static definitions. As such, happiness succeeds sadness and rebirth succeeds death. Indeed, the two images of funeral and drums are arranged directly one after the other in such a way that creates the misalliance familiar during carnivals only.

The situation echoes the carnivalesque approach of death where the participants mock death to subvert its tragic quality. Only the carnivalesque world permits and even embraces all kinds of sharp contrasts. Bakhtin further illustrates this phenomenon by referring to an example from *Crime and Punishment* that takes place during the funeral of Marmeladov. Bakhtin describes the event as "sharply carnivalized scene of scandals and dethroning at the funeral feast" (*Problems*, 1984, p. 146). Instead of showing respect to dignify the dead, people are completely indifferent to each other and care only of social appearances.

Within the context of the carnivalesque, the death of Nel's great grandmother generates the rebirth of Nel's individuality for she says "I'm me. Me" (*Sula*, 28). Indeed, this is the natural cosmic of the aging death that delivers the young rebirth. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984) Bakhtin clarifies that Rabelais' novel is rich with "The theme of death as renewal, the combination of death and birth, and the pictures of gay death" (51). A further carnivalized scene of death takes place inside the community of the Bottom during the funeral of Chicken Little. While Sula feels guilty and fears being punished for the boy's drowning, other people are indifferent to death. Indeed, Morrison states that "it was not a fist-shaking grief they were keening but rather a simple obligation to say something, do something, [and] feel something about the dead. They could not let that heart-smashing event pass unrecorded, unidentified" (*Sula*, 107). As such, the funeral scene showcases the misalliance of death and joy that characterizes both of carnival celebrations and the African American's communal life in the Bottom land that Morrison features in *Sula*.

In addition to the motif of death, *Sula* presents fire as an emblem the binary oppositions of life and death. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984), Bakhtin argues that "The Roman carnival ends with the Fire Festival... Each participant in the parade carries a lighted candle... each one tries to blowout his neighbor's candle" whereby the candle symbolizes an ambivalent death that may take place as it may not (248). In *Sula*, Eva perceives of drowning as being very painful, while burning in fire represents a new birth (*Sula*, 47). As opposed to the biblical concept of baptismal water as a source of rebirth, Eva regards water a merciless means of death. In her last words, Eva blames Nel and Sula for drowning Chicken Little. Ironically, however, Eva considers her act of burning Plum a relief not a torture. As such, Eva and Plum are regarded as participants in the "Fire Festival" wherein Eva lights off Plum's candle of life and kills him. According to her, Plum's burning symbolizes the end of his misery.

Images of fire and burning reappear when Hannah burns herself after Plum's death (*Sula*, 75). Hannah's suicide becomes open for multiple readings. Hannah uses fire to end her life for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, Hannah wants to make sure her mother Eva cannot forget her memory and to blame and punish her for setting Plum on fire. On the other hand, in the absence of her mother's love and compassion, Hannah feels lonely and deserted. Thus, she decides to finish her miserable life inside a dysfunctional family once and for all. From a mythological perspective, fire is a double sided symbol whereby it "appears both as a creative, cleansing force and as a destructive, punishing one" ("Fire," 2009, p. 379).

Through carnivalesque graphic images, Morrison visualizes the burning scene as she describes "Two cats sidled

through the legs of the crowd, sniffing the burned flesh. The vomiting of a young girl finally broke the profound silence and caused the women to talk to each other and to God" (*Sula*, 76). The quote describes people while gathering on the burning body of Hannah watching the scene in amazement and awe, a scene which is familiar during carnivals too where crowds gather in the marketplace.

In correspondence with the carnivalesque tradition of combining misalliances, fire in *Sula* represents this double meaning as Eva sees mercy in fire and Hannah sees pain and torture in it. Only in carnivals, elements lose their original meanings and acquire new ones according to the carnivalesque logic of "reverse, the positive continuous with the negative" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 409). Effectively, Morrison writes a novel where original meanings vanish and new ones materialize. Eventually, these carnivalized incidents and images contribute in the creation of the carnivalesque atmosphere of the novel as a whole.

Besides communal scenes of death and joy, the novel's setting of the Bottom exhibits the carnivalesque feature of irony. In the folk culture of carnivals, Bakhtin classifies "irony" and "humor" among the "the forms of reduced laughter" (*Problems*, 1984, p. 165). In *Sula*, the very name of Medallion connotes some kind of an award or a trophy that somebody wins after enduring some hardship. Ironically, African Americans indeed win this part of the land but the Bottom turns to be a punishment not a prize. This land in particular is very unfertile and very hard to accommodate people. As such, the whites' naming of the land as the Bottom represents a bitter irony to mock African Americans who live in this particular neighborhood. The Bottom has been a happy neighborhood where one could hear music and laughter that resemble carnival banquets where the participants enjoy a break from the established orders and the hierarchy of the rulers.

As Morrison stresses, the inhabitants of the Bottom enjoy laughter in order to forget hardships as "the pain would escape him [one] even though the laughter was part of the pain" (*Sula*, p. 4). In carnivalesque idioms, Bakhtin points out that during the Renaissance, laughter was wide spread; however, to close the nineteenth century, "reduced laughter-humor, irony, and sarcasm" replaced Renaissance laughter (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 120). Indeed, geographically speaking, this part of the land called the Bottom is situated in the up hills; however, according to the whites, the land is in the bottom because "when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we [the whites] call it so. It's the bottom of heaven" (*Sula*, p. 5). The whites believe that God has selected their race as superior while the African Americans constitute the inferior race; therefore, God would look down to the up hills, where the African Americans live, as the bottom instead of the upper. Moreover, just like the bitter beginning of the land's existence, the joke of the Bottom in Medallion city ends in a bitter way as well.

Despite highlighting the African American archetypal dilemma, Morrison maintains balance and objectivity through her critique of African Americans and their lack of solidarity. When they imitate the whites' appearances, for instance, they become like the masqueraders wearing a mask during carnivals. Masquerades are typical occurrences during carnivals; Bakhtin clarifies that "As early as the Renaissance a *festive court masquerade* culture begins to develop, having absorbed into itself a whole series of carnivalistic forms and symbols (mostly of an externally decorative sort)" (*Problems*, 1984, 130, emphasis in original). The incident of the masquerade divulges the great impact of the white "official culture" upon African Americans as well as their low self esteem. As such, Morrison wants to make African Americans proud of their physical traits that distinguish them from others and never attempt to change according to the norms of other people.

Morrison portrays the way the Bottom's community imitates the whites by working on their physical appearances so as to elevate their status quo. In spite of their attempts to be distinguished, African Americans cannot escape the feeling of being immersed in a world set by the whites' norms. The novel showcases examples that vary between attempts to straighten the hair in Irene's Palace of Cosmetology and Helene's constant endeavors to better the shape of her daughter's nose. These trials reflect the dominance of beauty criteria of the white "official culture" and the blacks' attempt to hide behind the white mask. In this respect, Danow (1995) argues that "the mask in the carnivalized work" has a prominent role in creating "the illusion of transformation or change" (53). Eventually, this mask is an "illusion"

and since carnival is held momentarily, African American masqueraders cannot keep their disguise for good. In most cases, these masks fail and the real hair, nose, skin traits merge to the surface to remind the black masqueraders that it is fake and momentarily. While Morrison presents a critique of African Americans from within, she depicts the fragile structure and the lack of solidarity among members of the African American community. As such, the author's aim seems to stress the story of African American's downfall from within. Clearly, Morrison wants to pin points the shortcomings of African Americans in order to make them unite and stand against the dominant white culture. For one thing, their claims of racial solidarity are subverted in the incident when Helene and Nelare aboard the train: the blacks watch the white conductor as he humiliates Helene and the scene when they refuse to bury or even attend Sula's funeral.

Another example that clarifies the insincerity of African Americans occurs in *Sula* when Jude points out that solidarity makes the African American community different from the white one. Jude says to Sula "You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day" (*Sula*, p. 103-104). Jude's statement appears like a counter discourse against the white "official culture" that appreciates individualism, independence, and success as opposed to the African American' tendency towards gathering and uniting. African American gatherings have their roots in folk culture as in carnival marketplace gatherings. In that sense, African Americans resemble the participants in carnivals who belong to the common and ordinary men in face of the church's dominance and oppression and the feudal system's hierarchy back at that time. The African American community in *Sula*, however, lacks this sense of unity. This is "the human community" that "Dostoevsky's heroes" want to build but fail (*Problems*, 1984, p.280). As such, Morrison wants to remind African Americans of the power of unity and solidarity that they can obtain from their folk culture.

The novel also attributes the weakness of African Americans to their hypocrisy. Morrison illustrates the situation in a conversation among Jude, Sula, and Nel. Jude explains the love-hatred duality towards African Americans and maintains that the white women are obsessed with the black men but if they do not achieve what they desire, they accuse the blacks of rape. Ironically, Jude forgets that he and the blacks as well consider any relationship that combines a black woman with a white man "rape" (*Sula*, 113). Indeed, Morrison indicates that the African American community of the Bottom treats Sula intolerably after rumors that she carries relationships with white men. In carnivalesque terms, these love-hate feelings are common because they embody a kind of duality familiar during carnivals similar to what Bakhtin calls "praise and abuse, that is, a duality of tone" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 432).

Moreover, the great division between the two races manifests itself in the aggressive reaction of Sula's community towards her in the late part of the novel. Because the Bottom community hates Sula, they accuse her of carrying relationships with the white men without providing any evidence. On the one hand, these rumors show the community's power to condemn individuals. On the other hand, it indicates the African Americans' strong refusal to any close contact with the whites. According to their norms, Sula's rumored act is an unforgivable sin. As such, this refusal indicates the wide gap between the two cultures of the whites and African Americans which are in struggle all the time in a very similar way to the struggle of the "unofficial culture" and the "official culture" during carnivals.

Because of these divisions and lack of sincerity, the novel is preoccupied with the retribution and the downfall of many characters. In carnival idioms, because they insure renewal and reversal of fortunes, crowning and uncrowning constitute an important characteristic during time of carnivals (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 217). Morrison portrays Eva while she acquires the status of a queen when she has a house built and enjoys every moment of her life, by the end of the novel, however, the narrative tells about Eva's gradual demise. Her granddaughter Sula sends her away to a nursing home where she dies later. Besides Eva, Morrison chronicles the downfall of Hannah, Plum, Nel, and Sula. While Hannah and Plum die burning, Nel falls when her husband Jude betrays her with Sula and then abandons her. Likewise, Sula's life ends tragically.

Morrison depicts other scenes of downfall in the Bottom especially in the last part of the novel. The long storm of ice, for instance, makes people much poorer and more miserable. Even Shadrack is fed up of inviting people to

remember death in his annual march. In his last march, people appear gathering around him in this merry atmosphere very much like carnival gatherings around marketplace squares. The march has been a "respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain" as Morrison demonstrates (*Sula*, p. 160); however, many people including Tar Baby and the Dewey brothers die in a tunnel's accident marking the ultimate demise of the Bottom and "Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more" (*Sula*, p. 166). Because death is ambivalent in carnival terms, Morrison indicates that Sula's death brings happiness to the Bottom community because of the belief that Sula is indeed the source of their misfortune and misery.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin points out that "The ritual of decrowning completes, as it were, the coronation and is inseparable from it... And through it, a new crowning already glimmers" (p. 125). In regard to these series of dethroning, the reader may question any glimpse of hope for the African American community. Yet, in accordance with the regenerative tradition of the carnivalesque, *Sula* seems to be a visionary novel that looks ahead for future race relations in the United States. Indeed, on her deathbed, Sula prophesizes to Nel that the African Americans of the Bottom will one day understand Sula and love her but this day will come when they start tolerating each other and put an end to their hypocrisy. This love will take place when the African Americans of the Bottom unite together and release all their hidden desires and let it merge to the surface.

Sula foretells these aspirations by saying that "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 after all the whores make love to their grannies; after... then there'll be a little love left for me" (*Sula*, p. 145-146).

The above quotation constitutes Sula's final words alive with Nel before her ultimate death. Bakhtin contends that "Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 9). Sula's quote constitutes Morrison's resolution for the race of African Americans through reconciliation and understanding with the whites. If African Americans transgress different boundaries whether racially or socially that bound them to an inferior position, they can envision a better future. Unity also turns to be an important component that brings the African Americans near each other. As such, Morrison's novel is a visionary novel that foretells the future race relations in the United States. In accordance with the carnivalesque regenerative, transgressive, healing, subversive, and communal characteristics, Morrison entails this hopeful promise for the African American community.

Next to Morrison's critique of the sharp racial divisions, *Sula* turns to be a novel very much centered on its female characters with various images of "bodily lower stratum" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 20) that appear constantly. Morrison portrays Eva as the head of a matriarchal family made up of two daughters and a son. All of the family members suffer some kind of excess and grotesquerie starting with Eva who sacrifices her leg in return for some cash. Eva's son Plum returns from war traumatized and unable to cope with the ordinary life. When Eva burns him, she explains to Hannah that Plum becomes like a burden on her shoulders showing nothing but regress since his birth all through his life. Eva affirms that Plum "wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more" (*Sula*, p. 71). Because Plum suffers postwar trauma and becomes addicted to drugs, Eva sees that she cannot protect him in her womb like the time before he is born.

Bakhtin's equation of the carnivalesque birth that follows death corresponds with a situation in *Sula*. It crystallizes when Eva decides to end her son's pain by killing him. While burning Plum, Eva thinks that she is ending his wretchedness mercifully; Morrison describes the scene of delight that penetrates Eva upon the burning without the slightest feeling of guilt. Ironically, Eva tells Hannah that this is the fire of "baptism" (*Sula*, p. 47). Eva is the strong black mother who wants to protect her children even by killing them. According to Bakhtin, the maternal womb represents life-giving and procreation. Because of the ambivalent nature of carnivalesque images, birth is a dual image that implies "the grave [which] is related to the earth's life-giving womb" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 50). Indeed, when Eva feels that her womb is unable to protect Plum, she decides to carry him to the grave instead.

Besides Eva, Morrison depicts Sula in constant struggle against the established norms that her African American culture has set. Softing (1995) argues that "many of Morrison's female characters struggle with an alien ideology which will not accept them on their own terms" (p. 86). Sula seeks no assimilation inside her community and she keeps fighting for her own identity and liberty till the last breath. Sula's audacious behavior and provocative actions put her at crossroads with the norms of the African American culture. Because of this confrontation, Sula leaves Medallion for ten years and when she comes back, she appears dressing in carnival manner with clownish clothes described like "a movie star" (*Sula*, p. 90) while everybody stares at her. The scene of her return contains reversal elements whereby Sula takes a central role in a comedy or a play acted on stage while the Bottom residents take the role of spectators in the marketplace of Medallion.

The characters of Eva, Hannah, and Sula, like their mothers and their grandmothers are obsessed with physical interactions with men. Morrison indicates that "those Peace women loved all men. It was the love of men that Eva bequeathed to her daughters" (*Sula*, p. 41). The narrative reveals the fact that although Eva has one leg and relatively an old woman, she really enjoys men's company and fluttering. After the death of her husband, her daughter Hannah cannot live all alone by herself but she keeps a bunch of men near her in order to fulfill her excessive needs of love. In the same way, Hannah transmits to Sula the joy of carrying relationships without commitment. Eva, Hannah, and Sula's relationships with men echo the carnivalesque stress on the corporal. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984) Bakhtin clarifies that fertility lies in "the lower part" of the human body and belongs to "grotesque realism," while "the face or the head" lie in "the upper part" (p. 21). Likewise, Morrison depicts her female characters' corporality in a carnivalesque manner of hyperbolism but subversive and therapeutic ultimately.

Because the carnival tradition is regenerative, implications of Eva, Hannah, and Sula's corporality aim to ensure self assertion and actualization for these unmarried women. Furthermore, bodily implications destroy the "official" tone of sanity, reason, and elimination of bodily implications. It aims also to destabilize and question the notions of normal and abnormal. As far as Eva is concerned, while she mingles with men, she forgets about the ordeal when her husband deserts her with kids and runs to another woman. With men, her daughter Hannah also forgets that she is a widow at a young age. Finally, through her portrayal of Eva's granddaughter Sula, Morrison exhibits this regenerative aspect of the body also. When Sula carries a relationship with Jude, she thinks that this is a very natural act in response to her body's needs that makes her forget about the dysfunctional family she lives in with no love and family warmth.

The depiction of the regenerative aspects of Eva, Hannah, and Sula's free lives echo the image of the Black Madonna. Anna Fedele (2013) explains that the Black Madonna is "constructed in opposition to the White Virgin" (11). For Fedele, the dark skin color links the Black Madonna with earth which makes her image more realistic. This darker image stands in opposition to the church's repressive attitudes of female aspects like procreation as well as the church's portrayal of the white Virgin Mary as sacred and chaste. Thus, the Black Madonna solidifies the feminine aspects and reveals both its positive and destructive abilities in a realistic way (*Fedele*, 2013, p. 11). Indeed, Eva, Hannah, and Sula's corporality appears, regenerative, realistic, and subversive to the whites' aesthetics of femininity. By doing so, Morrison reverses the gaze of the white culture towards the African American female.

In carnivalesque terms, the designation of the positive and negative poles of all human beings echo Danow's (1995) explanation of the connectedness between the archetypes and the carnivalesque when he says "both impulses represent related features of the same 'face,' revealing a visage that at times smiles at the potential prospects of the collective human endeavor, but at other moments appears perplexed and horrified at the result of that endeavor" (p. 138). He adds that carnival is considered an archetypal activity that has "outlasted all other 'texts' in their resilience and productivity as the great resource of the human psyche" (p. 149). Indeed, this is the nature of human beings that dates back to ancient times.

Because the carnivalesque representations of the corporal belong to the Bakhtinian grotesque, it includes exaggerations and eccentricity that cannot show up in the non-carnival life. Morrison depicts eccentric images that are very appropriate to reflect the experience of African Americans. In the carnivalesque context, Bakhtin points out that

Dostoevsky links the "humanly significant" with eccentricity in the majority of his works' protagonist (*Problems*, 1984, p. 150). Indeed, Morrison blends the African American experience with this touch of eccentricity to reveal how the humanity of this race is constantly robbed away. In addition to Helene, Morrison portrays the painful experience of the African American Shadrack during the war with eccentric images. The novel describes the brutality of the war and the massive loss it causes both to the human body and psyche. During war, Shadrack sees criminality and atrocity at first hand. His memory is filled with graphic images of the battlefield especially when he "saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before Shadrack expresses his shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappears under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet" (*Sula*, p. 8). Similarly, Bakhtin emphasizes that "Carnivalization is not an external and immobile schema which is imposed upon ready-made content; it is, rather, an extraordinary flexible form of artistic visualization" (*Problems*, 1984, p. 166). In other words, graphic images and depictions are very familiar in the carnivalesque mode.

Besides eccentric images, Morrison uses eccentric language as a means for expressing racial differences. In *Rabelais and His World* (1984) Bakhtin contends that "The importance of abusive language is essential to the understanding of the literature of the grotesque" (p. 27). In the novel, throughusing a vernacular language, African Americans want to separate themselves from the effects of the white dominant culture. As such, African Americans' language is carnivalized because it constitutes the "unofficial" side of the white's standards and regulations. In other words, these people like to distinguish themselves from the whites' norms of verbal interactions as a kind of escape or refusal of the dominant rules. Examples like "Meridian. We be pulli'ndirec'lin... Kin you make it?," and "you lyin' heifer" (*Sula*, 23-93) make it hard for the white person to understand this kind of speech because it functions to disguise meanings and escape misunderstandings.

This special use of diction equally parallels carnival occasions. Although Bakhtin points out that in modern times, this unique use of language may still exist but its "philosophical depth" is lost (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 16), the novel shows cases that behind surface meanings, an underlined subtext lies. Nel and Sula, for instance, receive Ajax's inappropriate and insulting words like "shit" and "pig meat" with great joy and "delight" (*Sula*, 50). Bakhtin affirms that inappropriate words and behaviors are allowed and heard frequently in the marketplace of carnivals including "familiar colloquial genres, curses, billingsgate metaphors, and analogies" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 114). This means that during carnivals, one can hear inappropriate words frequently and the literal meaning is hidden away from verbal restrictions of the church and the monarchy. As such, African Americans use verbal strategies in order to embed the literal meaning and transform it into the metaphorical one. By doing so, African Americans create their own language away from the whites' influence of standard grammar.

In fact, eccentricity, in terms of language, is Morrison's way to present another façade of reality in the United States' culture. It is a culture of differences between people who live within the same sphere. Henry Louis Gates' theory of the Signifying Monkey (1988) helps in deciphering African Americans' use of this particular vernacular English. Gates (1988) defines Signifyin (g) as "a rhetorical practice that is not engaged in the game of information-giving. Signifyin (g) turns on the play and chain of signifiers (52). As such, African Americans use verbal strategies in order to embed the literal meaning and transform it into the metaphorical one. By doing so, African Americans create their own language away from the whites' influence of standard grammar. Similar to this language, Bakhtin explains that participants in carnivals use "The familiar language of the marketplace [that] became a reservoir in which various speech patterns excluded from official intercourse could freely accumulate" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 17). As such, African American's special use of language subverts the tone of the whites.

In addition to the carnivalized category of eccentricity whether in terms of images or language, *Sula* oscillates between the magical and the real worlds. When Sula, for instance, returns to Medallion after ten years of absence, "a plague of robins" accompanies her return. The writer indicates that the inhabitants of Medallion are used to "excesses in nature-too much heat, too much cold, too little rain, rain to flooding" (*Sula*, 89). Because the blacks hate Sula, they take it for granted that the plague is a very bad omen. They look at Sula as a witch who comes to disturb their peace and break their daily life with her absurd behaviors. In carnivalesque idioms, Bakhtin contends that "Exaggeration,

hyperbolicism, excessiveness are generally considered fundamental attributes of the grotesque style" (*Rabelais*, 1984, p. 303). Explaining the connectedness between the magical realist tradition and the carnivalesque, Beata Gesicka (2003) argues that "the logic of the carnivalesque (with its exaggeration, excessiveness, 'billingsgate language,' and the aesthetics of the monstrous) provides the magical realist text with the capacity of undermining the validity of any given worldview, whether 'real' or 'magical' " (395). Thus, the link between magical realist incidents and the carnivalesque is strong.

Other magical incidents include the eternal youth of Sula and the three Dewey. At the beginning of the novel, they appear as children who attend the school. By the end of *Sula*, while everybody grows old, the Dewey brothers and Sula remain unchanged. In addition to Sula and the Dewey magical features, Tar Baby never speaks a word and he is rumored to be white not black. The strong winds that bring no rain for the African Americans of Medallion, also, are other phenomena that fall between the real and the magical. As rain symbolizes fertility and good harvest, its absence suggests nature's punishment of this community for its hypocrisy and lack of solidarity.

Bowers (2004) is a critic who emphasizes the carnival characteristics in magical realism in her book *Magic (Al) Realism* where she assembles magical realism next to Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Furthermore, Danow (1995) explains the magical realist occurrences that accompany carnivalesque incidents by stating that:

Both magical realism and grotesque realism are born not only from the ancient tale, legend, and myth but also from the darker aspect of folk 'wisdom' that includes superstitions and false beliefs...What distinguishes grotesque realism from its 'magical' counterpart is, as previously noted, its consistent emphasis upon 'evil forces' operating to the virtual exclusion of a potential positive correlative" (p. 120).

In other words, grotesque realism is much darker and negative compared to magical realism. Nevertheless, magical realism and grotesque realism overlap and coalesce sometimes in one single literary work because they find source in primordial human origins.

Based on Danow's classification, the plague of ribbons and the strong rainless wind belong to the grotesque realism tradition because they seem to reflect the dark side of the Bottom's African American population. Sula, the Dewey brothers, and Tar Baby's magic, however, belong to the magical realist tradition as these people refuse to imitate or even to resemble the larger community. Morrison employs these magical instances in order to subvert both of the community's beliefs and the whites' false prejudices. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin explains that the carnivalized genre of Menippea is rich with the element of the "fantastic" which "serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it" (p. 114-115, emphasis in original). Indeed, the magical in *Sula* questions the established norms of the natural and the unnatural.

All in all, the chapter makes use of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque poetics that reveal the complexity of racial issues in the United States from the point of view of an African American woman. Morrison excels in presenting a story wherein she criticizes the white dominant racial system but more importantly Morrison objectifies her stand through showing the shortcomings of the African American community from within.

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أهمية الكرنفالية في الرواية الأمريكية في رواية طوني موريسون

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ملخص

بعيدا عن الأدب الأوروبي، الكلاسيكي، وأدب عصر النهضة الذي تناوله ميخائيل باختين (1895-1975) في دراسته، يهدف هذا البحث إلى مناقشة أهمية الكرنفالية في الرواية الأمريكية، حيث تمثل رواية طوني موريسون (1931) سولا (1973) مثال على ذلك. تضم الكرنفالية في الأدب على أنشطة شعبية، انقسامات، ومبالغات وخصائص أخرى، تهدف إلى كسر المعايير ويزوغ حقيقة جديدة. ينطرق هذا البحث إلى تلك المميزات من أجل النقصي عن مجموعة مواضيع ذات صلة بالتمييز العنصري في سولا.

الكلمات الدالة: الكرنفالية، العرق، باختين.

* كلية اللغات الأجنبية، الجامعة الأردنية. تاريخ استلام البحث 2017/3/27، وتاريخ قبوله 2017/7/4.