

The Impact of an Oppressive Force Displayed by the Deweys in *Sula*

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In *Sula*, the importance and complexity of community is reiterated many times. One especially significant “sub-community” is the deweys, as the storyline and experiences of this three-person community plays an important role in Morrison’s commentary and representation of the comprehensive Black community. Morrison intertwines the histories and struggles of the deweys and the Black community in a way that clarifies why communal reliance is so prevalent within both groups. However, there is a stark difference between these groups- the deweys accepted the role given to them by an oppressive force, while the Black community has actively fought against a similar one. By portraying the similar shared histories of subjugation by oppressive forces, but then diverging the deweys’ response from that of the Black community, Morrison relays how white society aims to confine Black society to a singular identity. In the same way, the deweys confine themselves to an identity-less state.

The deweys represent how the trauma that has been forced on Black people, generates an insular, self-protecting community. Both the deweys and African Americans suffered from maternal abandonment the former as they were orphaned and the latter as they were forcibly removed from their motherland. The deweys arrive with “woolen caps and names

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given to them by their mothers, or grandmothers” yet nearly immediately, “Eva snatched off the caps off their heads and ignored their names” (37). In stating how it was maternal figures who gave the deweys their personal belongings, Morrison ties the three boys to the larger Black community. The African motherland bestowed an individual identity to Black people, that immediately upon being displaced in a foreign environment was stripped from them through the removal of their clothing and personal belongings. The deweys’ progression of loss completely mirrors the aforementioned process, as they go from losing the mothers who gave them their individuality to then being forced to lose that very individuality. The loss the deweys suffer from eventually grows into them “becoming in fact as well as in name a dewey” (38). Through her depiction of how Eva ignores the deweys’ names and then in how the deweys accept Eva’s naming, Morrison highlights how one can be forced into becoming the name they are given. The deweys accept their position and assigned name by taking on a doubly-morphed and conformed role within their group, undoubtedly becoming “a trinity with a plural name,” a phrase in and of itself signifying that they are a group formed from multiple parts, much like the Black community (38). By constructing a narrative where the deweys “accept[ed] Eva’s view” and embody their joined name, Morrison juxtaposes their reaction to a loss of identity with the historical reactions of African Americans to the same reality (38). The Black community did not succumb to the name given to it by its suppressors; instead, it actively fought against it for hundreds of years. However, even though the Black community rejected its name of “slave”, white America has never forgotten the original role of Black people in this country, and so even hundreds of years after slavery, Black people were still viewed and treated as second class citizens. A name and its

connotations are extremely difficult to escape once the oppressive force has already instilled it, as is evident with both the deweys and the Black community. The deweys create a new community through their acceptance of the death of their individuality and renaming, while Black people formed their own communities to re-establish their own, new Black identity and a self-chosen name separate from that given to them for themselves. By relating the deweys to the Black community in America, Morrison depicts that while both groups built new communities to re-establish a sense of belonging, the Black community rejected the singular identity of its oppressors while the deweys did not.

The trauma which the deweys face becomes heightened when it progresses to dehumanization. Morrison relays the deweys' process of being dehumanized primarily through how Eva treats them, such as when Eva rhetorically asks, "'What you need to tell them apart for? They's all deweys'" (38). Eva completely belittles the individual identities of each boy and is the catalyst for the deweys being viewed as a sub-human entity by others. By suggesting that being able to distinguish each boy is unnecessary because she has deemed them to all be essentially the same, Eva subjects the deweys to an inferior status over which she has control. This is highly reminiscent of the destruction of identity and loss of individuality which African Americans faced during slavery, and in this circumstance, Eva has the same power and position as slave masters. The deweys' experience is linked to Black communities in this way as both are stripped of their identity by an oppressive force and are degraded to an indistinguishable grouping. Furthermore, much like slave owners, Eva's power over the deweys stems from her literal possession of them, as is made evident when she says, "Look at Dewey. My my mymymy" (37). Eva is expressing that this

Dewey (and eventually the others, also) is now hers, she embodies a sense of ownership over him. Through her repeated use of “my” and then the quick succession of the word without spaces, Morrison blatantly showcases Eva’s predatory and possessive voice. This is the voice and mindset which dehumanizes the deweys to the point that Eva only views them through a lens of ownership; their whole existence is confined to the state of being a possessed entity. It is because of this process of loss and subsequent dehumanization that they become “inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves”; they form a close-knit community out of self-defense against a cruel exterior, a phenomenon that is historically mirrored in the Black community. Morrison conveys that by essentially morphing into each other and creating their insular group, the deweys replace what is stripped from them in terms of individuality with group conformity. In aligning the history of the deweys with the history of the Black community, Morrison highlights how shared trauma and dehumanization by external forces leads to the creation of a self-sustaining and self-reliant community with both groups.

The conformity that the deweys aspire to because of an oppressive external force is the root cause of their inability to mature, figuratively and literally. Lack of one’s own identity prohibits growth and the deweys are a staunch reminder of this as people realized “the deweys would never grow. They had been forty-eight inches tall for years now...they remained boys in mind” (84). Morrison displays that the deweys’ stunted growth is the direct product of their loss of identity. By introducing the physical immaturity of the deweys and then presenting their mental immaturity Morrison makes it evident that they are comprehensively underdeveloped. Having to remain so indebted to community values tethers individuals to

a conformed state of being and makes growth of any form a struggle. This is illustrated when the deweys are seen "... playing chain gang; their ankles bound one to the other... they tumbled, struggled back to their feet and tried to walk single file" (72). Through this description, Morrison reveals the deweys' complacency with their lack of identity and how they have become nearly subservient, leading to an inability to move forward. The chaining of the deweys, however, is self-imposed; they choose to shackle themselves and choose a group identity over an individual one. By not even attempting to overcome their conformity, they subject themselves to their own imprisonment. However, the deweys' confinement of themselves to a group identity was exacerbated by an unhealthy environment, which yet again bears a resemblance to the Black community. Yet, the Black community differs in the sense that there are less extreme communal expectations to conform than with the deweys; instead, the presence of confinement of identity exists because of stereotypes generated by white society. Unlike the deweys, Black people have actively fought to distance themselves from the notion that they are one indistinguishable grouping, a notion which is pushed by white society. The antithetical reactions of the deweys and the Black community highlights how the deweys remain addicted to their conformity while white society remains addicted to the Black community conforming to racial stereotypes.

Morrison expands the idea of ailment due to a confined existence through the deweys' actual disease-- addiction. There is a resounding message that the death of the individual is synonymous with disease. When the dewey states, "We sick...We need some medicine" this alludes to their loss of personhood has transpired into an illness (129). Although the deweys are not actually sick, Morrison is highlighting that their state of existence is a sickness due to their acceptance of a

wholly conformed state and lack of individualism. The deweys become addicted to “the catarrh remedy they loved to drink” because their coping mechanism of conformity wasn’t enough to handle their trauma; they could not outrun the pain of loss and oppression (129). The Black community has also not been able to completely overcome oppressive forces, as systemic racism and white supremacy are very much alive today and at the time Morrison wrote *Sula*. Morrison makes evident that no matter how much progress Black bodies make or what Black communities do to protect themselves from white oppressive forces, for an unforeseeable amount of time there will continue to be a force holding down Black people. This is shown through Nel seeing “colored people working in the dime store behind the counters, even handling money with cash-register keys around their necks” and being reminded of the deweys (163). Morrison reiterates that things only seemed better. Once surface-level progress is overlooked it is evident that the “colored people” are still in servitude to white people. By being behind the counter and working for the betterment of a white person’s life, it is made staunchly clear that these young Black people of the Bottom who remind Nel so much of the deweys still serve as tools for white capitalism. The system that had put chains around their ancestors’ necks was simply putting newer, nicer looking chains around theirs. Morrison’s point is that the deweys’ conformity and creation of an exclusive, insular community was not enough to break away from external oppression. The deweys, if they were alive, would still have chains around their necks there would just be the guise of progress hovering over them. While Morrison paints a disheartening picture of an undefeatable oppressive class, her depiction of the deweys’ sick state also conveys that adherence to the oppressor’s narrative is the least likely path for change.

The accumulation of loss, dehumanization, and continuous presence of oppression is bound to weigh heavily on any person or group. The deweys are presented as coping with this reality through the formation of a community and complete merging of self into that community. By mirroring the history of the deweys with the history of Black America, Morrison relays how the Black community was also formed as a sort of protective barrier to further trauma. Through linking these two groups together, Morrison identifies why these insular communities were formed and the complex positives and negatives of their formation. In addition, her portrayal of the deweys allows her to craft a message of warning to the Black community to not become as invested in communal conformity as the deweys are. Too much conformity would allow Black America to fall into a singular identity, further playing into white society's harmful stereotypes and tropes of Black bodies.

WORKS CITED

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Vintage Classics, 2020.