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# The Function of Rituals in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Kaoru Katsuta

Ritual is a ceremony which marks special occasions with a symbolic act. There are certain crucial moments in human experience, for example, birth, marriage, and death, and each has its appropriate rituals. Also ritual often requires the involvement of a whole community, as with funeral banquets and Sunday church services, bringing it together in communion. On such occasions ritual is an enactment of a collective drama. And it seeks to solemnize the occasion by arousing the appropriate feelings in the participants. In a funeral service, for instance, worship is intended to give dignity to the dead by inspiring the mourners with awe and grief, and by reminding them that they can extend sympathy to each other only in this life.

Ritual can be reassuringly repetitive. A devoted Christian stricken with sorrow, say over the death of a loved one, may cling all the more to the immutable church calendar which includes Thanksgiving through Christmas to Easter, for his grief can be in some measure mitigated as he traces the passage of Christ from the Passion through momentary defeat by death to the ultimate triumph of the Resurrection. For this person, religious rituals, with their dependable regularity, compensate for bewildering changes in a chaotic world.

Another function of ritual is the commemoration of important occasions. It makes its participants aware through group activities that they are a part of a larger tradition, bestowing on them a recognition of historical continuity and consequently a much needed

sense of security.

The various functions of ritual as briefly described above, in most cases, work simultaneously in a single ritual. As the critic Clyde Kluckhohn has put it, the purpose of ritual is "the institutionalized gratifications of culturally recognized needs<sup>1)</sup>" of any given society. The various needs of a cultural group as well as its psychological makeup and its responses to the pressures of its environment determine the ceremonial expressions, the rituals of that culture.

It is not surprising then to see that ritual plays a large part in novels of rural America, especially those set in Black America about three or four decade ago. Toni Morrison, as a writer of such novels, consistently depicts rural and semi-rural Afro-American communities and its well-preserved rituals as they were in the recent past between 1920 and 1965. Even though with her latest novel, *Tar Baby*, she presents a contemporary world as described in a white upper-class household vacationing on a Carriibbean island with its black domestic servants, her interest in rituals continues. As a novelist, she is anxious to record rapidly disappearing rituals, the purposes of which modern men have forgotten. Sometimes, Morrison admits, such traditional rituals are too frail to express human passions fully; they have simply become anachronistic. Thus, depending upon whether ritual is a shaping force in human experiences or not, Morrison's attitude toward it ranges from reverence to irony. But beyond that, she suggests a personal creation of new rituals which would fit the needs of a contemporary man.

At this point, it might be useful to look briefly at the uses of ritual in her novels. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison uses a variety of imagery drawn from pagan rituals of sacrifice to describe the heroine as a scapegoat or martyr in her society. On the other hand, a series of life-celebrating rituals are graphically presented to give range and solidity to her chronicle of a black community in the rural South. Her second novel *Sula* marks a notable increase in the number of personalized rituals, and at the

same time Morrison continues to celebrate black ingenuity as exemplified by its oral tradition, a ritual in itself. In her third novel *Song of Solomon* she uses rituals first to show the strength of a black family united in efforts to keep the memory of its primitive roots alive. Then she writes approvingly of the transmission of folk tales from one generation to the next as a ritual and a particularly dignified survival mechanism; black people, in particular through children's playsongs, perpetuate the history of their slave heritage, which can be a legitimate source of sustaining self-esteem to a black individual by awakening in him kinship and respect for tradition.

In contrast, in *Tar Baby*, Morrison's fourth novel, the personal rituals are meant to expose the false harmony within the household, which is seen as a microcosm of contemporary American society. Opposed to this sterility is the vitality of a black reprobate who finds personal meaning in the folk tale tradition of an all-black town in the rural South. Further there is a lavish use of West Indian verbal ritual to show the tenacity and creativity of the Carriibbean blacks, their ancestors triumphing over the oppressive environment of colonialism.

As this brief survey of her novels shows, Morrison makes use of black rituals for a number of purposes. However, a detailed examination of a single novel may help us to further clarify the methods and goals in her treatment of rituals. In the following pages, therefore, I will describe some of the ways in which Toni Morrison's second novel *Sula* achieves intensification of mood, clarification of character, deepening of theme, and how she achieves universality through the use of vividly depicted rituals. Further I will also show the social functions of rituals which seem to play a crucial part in Morrison's works.

*Sula* as material is chosen because it is most representative of her work as well as the most varied in its use of rituals. Admittedly in *Sula*, rites are treated in a rather crude fashion; *Sula* does not have the unity of a ritual motif as displayed in her other novels.

Yet the very diversity of *Sula's* rituals seems to suggest Morrison's growing awareness of their evocative power, and she explores this power more extensively in the novels that follow *Sula*. Moreover, the very tentativeness of Morrison's treatment directs us to the themes which she continues to depict in later novels but with more confidence and artistic control.

*Sula* shows us various rituals which have been preserved in the Bottom, a semi-rural black community in Medallion, Ohio, three decades preceding the time of the actual composition of the novel. Some of the rituals are religious, e. g., the burial of Sula, the numerous mid-week prayer meetings, and the funeral of Chicken Little, a young boy whom Sula inadvertently drowns when she is twelve years old. And whereas Christian ceremonies are rigidly observed on major public occasions, voodoo also, with its distinctive rites, is depicted as a belief system with a worldview as coherent and valid as any other. In particular, people depend on voodoo to help them with their personal problems.

Other rituals are social, such as the celebrations associated with the Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays, the wedding reception of Nel and Jude where neighbors join in the friendly act of feasting, and gossip sessions. The depiction of such rites helps create the essential illusion of a normal life that surrounds the rare, intense moments when the characters experience a spiritual crisis. Like all other good novelists, Morrison also records the more personal versions of ritual, those which are reverentially kept by a family or a person in order to register particular memories. Some solitary, private rituals are created by the individual because the traditional rituals are no longer adequate to deal with a rapidly changing society. Further rituals sometimes need to be revised as each new generation adapts them to their special times and circumstances. Aside from this, humanity has fundamentally ritualistic impulses, and Morrison's characters are frequently caught in an elaborate and idiosyncratic act with which they unconsciously try to give special meanings to the varied phases of experience.

There are some instances in which the novelist utilizes rites to create the mood and atmosphere of the community. Morrison effectively evokes a sense of life in touch with the four seasons through the use of conventional ritual. A case in point would be the scene in which the two girls, Sula and her best friend Nel, are passing through a series of puberty rites. They daydream of adolescent boys. They roam the streets looking for boys, yet pretend indifference in front of them in order to encourage their attention. It is early summer, a season of brightness and verdure. The general flutter of life surrounding the girls is highly relevant, for their behavior shows that they are trying to obey the procreative principles of the surrounding nature which is undergoing at this moment its seasonal cycle of growth and change. Later the girls appropriately poke the ground at the riverside to stir the dormant seeds of life underneath.

Still in another instance of evoking the appropriate mood, the rite is presented as merely routine for the participants. They have forgotten the original purpose of the rite, and the ceremonial behavior prescribed by tradition become merely ornamental. For example, there is an ironical reversal of the usual expectation the people have for the winter holiday season, the time from Thanksgiving to Christmas. The former should be socially exhilarating because of the special meals and activities while the latter is normally religiously exalting because of the memory of the birth of Christ. But one particular winter strikes the Bottom with exceptional severity, ruining the harvest and any prospect of wages and multiplying the season's usual hardships. However, heedless of the earthly woes, the Yuletide comes. People mirthlessly observe a washed-out version of its ceremonies but they cannot generate even the faintest semblance of seasonal gaiety. The observance only makes the holiday season appear more bleak because of the many defects involved in the observance of rites. There is not enough money to prepare the traditional Christmas feast. The children are ill in bed. There is no giving of presents. And white people with charity bags are

greeted with general apathy. Thus, the absence of any deep feelings in the rite makes the atmosphere all the more depressing.

Still ritual is not only a device of creating a proper mood in this novel. As for character, Morrison sometimes uses rites to articulate its various aspects, and to this end in one instance, she relies on the traditional associations that the Christian rite of baptism by water has. For her own purposes she puts the rite into a totally secular context, and her use of it emphasizes a quasi-sacramental significance that the author wishes to grant on the episode. The scene centers around the drowning of Chicken Little, an event viewed by Morrison as a spiritual death and rebirth for Sula, the unwitting agent of this accident. Concerning this scene the critic Barbara Christian writes:

Because of the feelings that led to it, this accidental death by water is Sula's baptism into her search for some continuity between the natural world and the social world, between the precariousness of life and the inevitability of death.<sup>2)</sup>

So Christian rightly points out that the author deliberately interjects death into the midst of the generative nature, and that the incongruity of the event serves to illuminate the essential duality of life and death underlying existence on earth. Yet it is very doubtful if Sula ever comes to reflect upon this in the novel, and the awareness is meant for the reader alone. This rite, it seems to me, marks a stage at which Sula is freed from comfortable illusion about herself; she attains the painful self-knowledge that she is not as good a person as she imagined herself to be. To her dismay, Sula finds that she does not feel any compunction or remorse over the death of Chicken Little. She is aware only of some unpleasant feelings of culpability. Thereafter, she decides to reject all false illusions about herself as well as about other people. She decides to pierce through appearances uncompromisingly and to reach at realities. The old Sula as a victim of self-deception dies and a new Sula emerges: a Sula whose passion for self-knowledge is disinterested to the point that she appears cold-blooded, a girl who eagerly watches

her mother burn to death, who is willing to inflict pain as well as feel it, if only she can trace every bend and turn of her consciousness in response to such occasions.

Another device to show characterization is to make the events and people of *Sula* evoke a larger myth, a larger ritual. At one point in the story, a white bargeman finds Chicken Little's corpse in the river and treats it as if it were a piece of dirt. He complacently reflects upon the white man's burden to elevate Ham's sons (here the bargeman means black people) who are so uncivilized as to kill off their own offspring<sup>3)</sup>—for he is sure this boy has been drowned by his parents. The bargeman belongs to a long line of white people calling for a biblical sanction for racial discrimination. But his character as a Christian is presented obviously flawed because the reader see his failure to show proper reverence for the dead.

Morrison also draws from European literary tradition and myths to show the complexity and ambiguity of a character which deny a neat, monolithic explanation. Sula's grandmother Eva burns her son Plum to death when she finds out that he is a junkie because she cannot allow his self-destruction. A mother's murder of her son, an unnatural act, reminds us of the dual aspects of the ancient Earth Mother Goddess who takes life away as well as gives it.

Eva's perversity is shown in her private rituals, too. She is called "the creator and sovereign<sup>4)</sup>" of the family, and she is usually generous and protective. But she is also motivated by malicious impulses and occasionally acts like a Calvinistic god or a tyrant who bestows favors and punishment according to the passing moods, frightening its helpless subjects into involuntary obedience. Thus she whimsically deprives the Deweys, her protégés, of their original names and rechristens them at the time of their adoption. This is an act that tramples their humanity, Morrison seems to be saying, because the Deweys eventually lose their separate character and merge into a single identity.

Most interestingly, rituals sometimes direct our attention un-



obtrusively to the important themes in the novel. Morrison uses the medieval mythical figure of the fool for this purpose. Shadrack, a shell-shocked soldier turned outcast, is made to behave in the ways that remind us of the fool in medieval literature. That fool was licensed by the medieval courts to drive away the ill luck of feudal lords through the use of ceremonial verbal abuse. In the novel, we are told that Shadrack is the only black man who can curse white people with impunity. This casual association is further reinforced by the explicit comparison of Shadrack to the Pied Piper of Hamelin who is clothed, we remember, in the traditional costume of a professional fool. At the end of the novel, Shadrack is seen to lead a procession of the Bottom people to their doom, just as the Piper did. The procession produces an unholy glee in which communal outcasts participate freely with other members, and it ends in a mob violence scene in which the participants release their pent-up rage over their oppressive environment.

Most notably, however, Shadrack's function resembles that of the fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Shakespeare's fool, through his apparently cruel words to the king, steadily initiates him in the discipline of perseverance though his behavior seems superficially absurd. Similarly, Shadrack's view of life is strangely coherent in spite of his madness, as reflected in his originating National Suicide Day, the Bottom's unique holiday. On that day, Shadrack engages alone in a rite by parading with a hangman's rope in hand, ringing a cowbell, and inviting people to kill themselves. His message is that death is a solemn occasion and that one should rise to it by opting for the dignity of deliberate self-destruction in lieu of the absurdity of accidental death. Through his rite, Shadrack is trying to organize a world which he perceives to be chaotic. He preternaturally recognizes that man is pitifully struggling in the midst of numerous pitfalls of chance and change which eventually overtake him in the form of death. Consequently he intends to mask the fundamental insecurity of human existence, to give the uncertain future the appearance of safety through a recurring symbolic action:

In the back of the wagon, supported by sacks of squash and hills of pumpkins, Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In this manner he instituted National Suicide Day.<sup>5)</sup>

His neighbors are quick to grasp his wisdom despite his madness and this understanding renders Shadrack's deviation unthreatening to the community. Consequently they acknowledge his wisdom by incorporating Suicide Day into their calendar.

The theme of a holy fool, a preternaturally wise madman, is not embodied in Shadrack alone. There are the three Deweys, who like Shadrack and Sula, are also communal pariahs. (The Deweys, Shadrack, and Sula represent each a different kind of pariah. Among them, only Sula openly rejects the communal rites, dismissing the collective memory symbolized by them. Sula's defiance of the order makes her unacceptable to her neighbors in the way Shadrack and the Deweys are not.) They are little people, afflicted as most of the earlier medieval fools were afflicted with physical deformity. Also there is something inscrutable about them; our last glimpse of the Deweys is their disappearance into the water during a collapsing tunnel accident; yet their bodies mysteriously are never found. They seem to have simply vanished, much in the same way as the fool in *King Lear* on the heath. Thus we realize that we are asked casually to be alert for signs of wisdom hidden in the freakish behavior of the Deweys in the preceding scenes. When we reread the novel, we notice that the crucial scene presenting the Deweys as holy fools is the occasion when people gather to witness the horror of Hannah's fatal accident. The Deweys are the only people who do not misrepresent their honest emotional response by clothing them in social formality. Other people are respectively

shocked, grieved, and terrified; in short, they behave in the ways expected of them at such a time. In contrast, the Deweys are shamelessly fascinated, and their reaction in fact illuminates one of the major themes in the story, namely the incongruity between social forms and the true inner feelings of the individual.

The same theme is most strikingly exemplified by the funeral service of Chicken Little. It is vividly depicted in all its variety and sensuousness. The funeral draws a large congregation. The Junior Choir sings funeral hymns. Nel and Sula are in the children's pew. Reverend Deal gives the sermon and the tearful women gesticulate feverishly. Still, we sense that something is drastically wrong with the entire ritual and thus, with the participants, the congregation. Morrison deliberately draws our attention to this aspect by first presenting the variety of emotional response of the children in attendance on whom the dark solemnity of the occasion is lost because they do not understand the irrevocability of loss by death. Thus, the Junior Choir is innocently excited by the rare spectacle they witness, mutely enjoying the unusual attention they receive by singing. "[T]heir eyes [were] fastened on the songbooks they did not need, for this was the first time their voices had presided at a real-life event.<sup>63</sup>" Nel, who had witnessed the accident, in turn is afraid lest some adult should accuse her of a share of responsibility in the accident. Sula is overwhelmed by her sense of guilt and is very much frightened. But her fears are ones of pain and confusion and not of sadness for the deceased.

However, the children are not the only members in attendance who do not respond correctly to the ceremony. In spite of their devotional swaying of bodies and theatrical show of grief, the adults are not really moved. The act of worship is simply a routine for them. As Reverend Deal moves into his sermon, the church women dance and shriek in response. But the sermon does not arouse their neighborly kindness and sympathy for the dead; it merely triggers socially becoming behavior on their part. The women, then, are motivated by the necessity to observe neat, polite social forms.

“They did not hear all of what he said; they heard the one word, or phrase, or inflection that was for them the connection between the event and themselves.<sup>7)</sup>” Later the grown-up Nel comes to recognize this, when her husband deserts her for another woman, and she finds that, try as she may, the appropriate feelings as a wronged wife do not touch her:

...She thought of the women at Chicken Little's funeral. The women who shrieked over the brier and at the lip of the open grave. What she had regarded since as unbecoming behavior seemed fitting to her now: they were screaming at the neck of God, his giant nape, the vast back-of-the-head that he had turned on them in death. But it seemed to her now that it was not a fist-shaking grief they were keening but rather a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the dead. They could not let that heart-smashing event pass unrecorded, unidentified. It was poisonous, unnatural to let the dead go with a mere whimpering, a slight murmur, a rose bouquet of good taste. Good taste was out of place in the company of death, death itself was the essence of bad taste. And there must be much rage and saliva in its presence. The body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the hands should have no peace, and the throat should release all the yearning, despair and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss.<sup>8)</sup>

Thus, the absence of any deep feeling is masked but not filled by a polite observance of social forms. Obviously the traditional form of ceremonial worship is too fail to define the occasion of death. Morrison's aim is, therefore, to point out the inadequacy of conventional rituals, its failure to be a shaping force of man's experience. And her criticism is made implicit by depicting the failure of the ritual's participants to respond properly.

Rituals may be felt more crucial in the breach rather than in the observance. We learn that Sula as a grown woman rebels against her community by rejecting its rites. Her rejection, in turn, marks her insolation. When she dies of cancer at the age of thirty, her neighbors do not go through the usual routines to lay her to rest. No preparation for the funeral is made. Nobody but Nel attends

the burial. To deviate from communal norms, the author implies, is to commit social suicide.

As another of her important themes, Morrison shows by presenting a number of personal rituals how compulsive and universal is the human impulse to ritualize life. Such rituals symbolize a person's fantasy, faith, yearning and despair. Human passions are defined by rituals in many ways. Thus the dying Sula poses as a fetus; she pretends that she is snug and undisturbed in the all-protecting womb of her bedroom. For a woman accursed with an ever-wakeful self-consciousness, death would be a welcome release. She yearns for the blissful unconsciousness of an embryo. This final ritualistic act is also her attempt to merge into the mythic cycle of birth-death-rebirth in which death figures as but the beginning of a better existence in some brighter world unknown.

Shadrack in this novel is a major vehicle to show individualized rituals as a device of wish fulfillment. Through him, Morrison depicts the defense mechanisms of a man who is suddenly cut off from the communal life after a shocking encounter with death on the battlefield. His sense of personal continuity is seriously threatened and he responds by creating a set of personal rituals to bind his experience. He keeps house with a militaristic zeal; he daydreams of a continuing war; he originates the National Suicide Day; and he develops a fetistic attachment to Sula's belt which had fallen from her clothes when she came to his house, the belt being a token of the only visitor he has ever had.

Ritual is used to support character, theme, and mood in the novel, but Morrison also depicts it to show that life is ritualistic in many ways. Indeed, people often behave in ceremonial ways to demonstrate that they have moved into a new phase in life. Thus ten-year-old Nel performs a solitary rite on the night she comes back from a trip with her mother, Helene, to her mother's birthplace in the South. The trip has been exhilarating because she comes to realize that her mother is faulted. Helene's authority over her daughter has been visibly weakened after Nel finds out that

Helene's mother is a Creole whore. Back in her own room, Nel gazes at her own reflection in the mirror and whispers, "I'm me. Me," as if those were magical words. In this way Nel rebels against her rigid, unimaginative parent; Nel is determined to explore the horizon of her own life.

Myth and ritual are used in *Sula* also to achieve universality. It is a means to render a legendary quality to the modest existence of the people depicted in this novel. Through the mythic references, the trivial signifies the universal, the unheroic becomes heroic. For example, Sula and her lover Ajax are cast in the figures of Semele and Zeus.<sup>9)</sup> Sula's efforts to establish a lasting bond with Ajax only estranges him; he views all ties as bondage. This rupture of modern lovers reminds us of the termination of love in the Greek myth, and both are brought about by a woman's thoughtless behavior. The Classical imagery bestows dignity and universality to Morrison's characters and shifts the action onto a timeless plane by implying a common lot shared by the mortals and the divine alike. The mythic references are themselves a kind of incantation, an appeal to a long tradition of narrative literature of which the author is a part.

Finally, there is a kind of communal ritual that the author warmly applauds, namely the age-old ritual of storytelling. This Afro-American linguistic tradition is used by Morrison to illuminate the social functions of ritual, to analyze the strengths of a black community figured here. At the beginning of the novel, the author unobtrusively inserts a "nigger joke," a folk tale in its own right, which had been handed down in the Bottom. The joke or tale explains why white people live in the fertile, valley land of Medallion, while black people live on the sterile hilly part where nature is hostile and the planting is backbreaking. The folk tale tells about a black slave outwitted by a cunning white farmer who had promised to give the black man a portion of land in reward for a particularly hard chore he had accomplished without incurring any substantial loss of property for the farmer. The master convinced his

slave to ask for the hilly land, pretending it to be the bottom of heaven. The joke indicates the particular quality of the Afro-American oral tradition which seeks to extract pleasure out of the pain of oppressive circumstances. The joke is an elaborate verbal ritual, because it seeks to commemorate the origin of the birthplace of black people in Medallion, which would be otherwise erased from the racial memory. This joke must have been especially pleasing to white people for it apparently perceives black people to be superstitious and backward. But the self-deprecating tone can be rhetorical, as is often the case with such folktales, and the safest way to laugh at the white greediness is to pretend to acknowledge white superiority in the mock humility of an unintelligent persona. If so, the tale is doubly ingenious because the element of protest is unrecognizable to the uninitiated ear. Once within the relaxed circle of black people, this negative self-image would transform into a positive one as the tale is told and re-told to celebrate their unique skill to combine pleasure and pain, and their determined refusal to be embittered by a hostile environment.

Black oral heritage testifies to the creativity of an oppressed people who have chosen to turn to their psychological resources to create legends and ironical jokes, surprisingly from their experiences of racial discrimination. The resiliency and resourcefulness of black culture are hard to recognize because of the obliqueness of expression a tortured culture instinctively adopts for the purpose of self-preservation. Therefore Morrison is careful to define the attempt at survival a society makes, but as the author so strongly emphasizes, it is an attempt to survive with dignity:

What was taken by outsiders to be slackness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe doctors could heal—for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental—life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew—only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as “natural” as springtime...The purpose of evil was to survive it and

they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide—it was beneath them.<sup>10)</sup>

Morrison sees the creativity nurtured in the oral transmission process that goes on from one generation to the next as the most effective survival mechanism employed by black people. In this novel, there are ritualistic tale-telling sessions in which each tale-teller competes for his virtuosity of verbal improvisation. Their favorite topic at this time is Sula who has recently come back to the Bottom after ten years of absence. The now grown-up Sula despises the banality of her hometown and defies its order by deliberately disregarding its mores. She banishes her grandmother into a lunatic asylum and becomes sexually promiscuous. Her behavior makes her a communal outcast. But even in isolation, Sula is belligerently self-reliant. Her neighbors are disgusted, though in actuality uncomprehending of what makes Sula act as she does. They label her deviations as supernatural evil and they make up fantastic stories to prove their point. Thus some of the men who were Sula's dates when she was a girl reminisce that on picnics neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her. Another woman says that she had seen Sula drink beer but she never belched. The people shift from what could be an impulsively dangerous reaction to a relatively harmless reaction, that is, a verbal rite of aggression. Moreover, such tale-telling competition has a distinctively dramatic element, with its story-maker as the main actor who provides amusement to the audience. This social ritual is a mixture of serious matter and game. Thus one of its purposes is to enhance the cohesiveness of the society by providing a formal statement of its value-attitudes and thus seeks to stabilize the society:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one



another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst.<sup>11)</sup>

Still another form of narrative ritual figured in this novel has something to do with popular belief in the supernatural. Morrison's characters narrate to each other strange dreams and this narration forms a crucial part of the story. People in the Bottom believe that dreams and unusual natural phenomena are often omens, alerting them to strange and possibly disastrous events to come. This belief in omens is a kind of communal wisdom in itself, used to lead a life that is full of often dreadful, unpredictable changes. Omens reduce the anxiety of worry over disasters, and while they may not thwart the disasters, the knowledge conveyed by them makes the hostile, chaotic forces seem less menacing.

The characters who convey their dreams often have a priestly function as well, as if they were listening to a confession during such dream narratives, believing that the sacred power of words can illuminate and help them survive disasters. Thus, Sula's mother Hannah dreams of a wedding with herself as the bride, though strangely enough she appears in a red gown, and she communicates this dream to her mother Eva. When Hannah accidentally catches on fire in the yard and burns to death, Eva belatedly recognizes that the dream of wedding meant death. To argue that this kind of popular belief is superstitious is irrelevant here. The forces of nature conspire to kill Hannah, granting a dignity to Eva's belief in the supernatural.

As we have seen, Toni Morrison uses rituals, religious and secular, in a number of ways in *Sula*. Her attitude toward them as reflected in the novel's varied tones is sometimes deferential, sometimes ironical. For better or for worse, ritual grows out of a long tradition and Morrison effectively employs it in her analysis of weaknesses and strengths of a black community. For a modern novelist, she treats ritual rather conservatively, though she is by no means unconscious of the need of its revision. In the final anal-

ysis, Morrison views man as a communal being, and ritual as a dignified means to relate man to man.

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## NOTES

- 1) Clyde Kluckhohn, "Myths and Rituals: A General Theory," in *Harvard Theological Review*, XXXV (1942); rpt. in *Myth and Literature*, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 44.
- 2) Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 161-162.
- 3) In American folk belief, Ham, who was cursed by his father Noah because he looked upon his father's naked body, is supposed by some to be the ancestor of black people.
- 4) Toni Morrison, *Sula*, 6th ed. (1973; rpt. New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1981), p. 26.
- 5) *Sula*, p. 12.
- 6) *Sula*, p. 55.
- 7) *Sula*, p. 55.
- 8) *Sula*, p. 92.
- 9) Semele is a daughter of Cadmus, the king of Thebes and the mother of Dionysus by Zeus in Greek myth. She wished to know how much her divine lover adored her, and she insisted that Zeus should come to her in his godly attire. Seeing him in all his glory, Semele was consumed in his lightning.
- 10) *Sula*, pp. 77-78.
- 11) *Sula*, pp. 102.

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