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## “A New Black Woman”

Discussing Gender and Race Norms using *Sula*  
in the EFL Classroom

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**Title:** “A New Black Woman”: Discussing Gender and Race Norms using *Sula* in the EFL Classroom

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**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to examine the possibility of using *Sula*, by Toni Morrison, as a pedagogical resource in the EFL classroom in order to raise students' critical thinking and an awareness of gender and race norms. The method used is a thematic reading of the novel. The theory used to carry out the study was norm-critical pedagogy. It helped analyze the main characters, Nel and Sula in regards to gender and race norms; and to discuss how to use the reactions from students in order to raise critical thinking and awareness of these norms. Pedagogical implications are discussed in relation to the novel, as it is an important and provocative novel about what it constitutes to be a black woman. The findings of the study show that Nel and Sula are portrayed as complex characters. Complexity in characters questions stereotypes that oppress, thus concluding that *Sula* might be a pedagogical resource.

**Keywords:** *Sula*, Toni Morrison, EFL classroom, critical thinking, gender norms, race norms, dichotomy of good and bad, norm-critical pedagogy, pedagogical resource, pedagogical implications.

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# 1. Introduction

The Swedish curriculum for upper secondary school (Gy11) mentions several fundamental values that teachers have to impart to their students through their everyday practice, some of which are: “the inviolability of human life, individual freedom and integrity, the equal value of all people, [and] equality between women and men” (Skolverket 4). These fundamental values are meant to be part of the core of teaching and to prevent social oppression in school. They also help raise awareness of social structures such as gender, race, sexuality, class and religion. Another important aspect mentioned is that schools and teachers have the responsibility to facilitate the acquisition of critical thinking in students so that they are able to take a stand on issues. The goal is that students critically examine what they see, hear and read in order for them to form an opinion (9).

Due to the fact that the fundamental values and the goal of critical thinking are important aspects in the Swedish school, I discuss (see 3.1) why teachers can use literature in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom in order to discuss and raise awareness about gender and racial norms in students. Collie and Slater state that literature can be used to assist students to understand cultural issues as these can be depicted through vivid descriptions. These cultural issues are “codes and preoccupations that structure a real society” (4), and this means that the codes that structure a society are invisible norms that could marginalize their members: for example, norms about gender and race.

In every society we find power structures that limit and oppress groups; therefore it is important to question and challenge these power structures in order to deconstruct *hegemonistic discourses* in society. Using authentic texts in discussion-based lessons can help the student develop critical thinking so that they are able to challenge and question gender and race norms. Therefore, my study is focused on the possibility of using *Sula* by Toni Morrison as a pedagogical resource to help raise awareness about gender and race norms. In order to discuss and explore this possibility I analyzed the main female characters, Nel and Sula; examined the questions that the specific themes in the novel might raise; and considered how teachers can use the students' reactions to the text to raise awareness about gender and race norms. Hence, my thesis is as follows: using *Sula* as a tool to discuss gender and race norms is possible if teachers help students reflect on their reactions and their prejudices as they read the text and reflect on how these might influence their reading.

According to many researchers *Sula* is an important and provocative text, it raises many questions about what it is to be a black female and the constraints of society; Toni Morrison's description of Sula as “metaphysically black [...]. She is new world black and new world woman

extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female” (*Unthinkable Things Unspoken* 25) is an apt description of what kind of black woman Sula is. The fact that she is disruptive, outlawed and uncontainable could help the reader to take a critical stand against gender and race norms.

## 1.1 Questions

In order to analyze *Sula* and the main characters and to explore the pedagogical potential of the novel in the EFL classroom, I focus on the following questions:

- How are Nel and Sula portrayed regarding gender and race?
- What questions arise from the way in which Morrison deals with the themes in the novel?
- How can I use the students' reactions to the characters and the themes in order to raise their critical awareness?

## 1.2 Method

My study is a thematic reading of *Sula* by Toni Morrison, focusing on the themes that can help a teacher and his/her students discuss gender and race norms in the classroom. I analyze the main characters, Nel and Sula, in order to look at gender and race norms. I use norm-critical pedagogy to discuss the implications of using the novel. I also discuss how the students' reactions could be used to raise awareness and develop critical thinking. In particular, the questions proposed by Kumashiro (*Against Common Sense* 73-74) (see Appendix 1) to broaden the student's view are used as a basis for the students' discussions. I have added my own questions to raise awareness about gender norms.

One limitation to my method is I only focus on gender and race; norm-critical theory, which is intersectional, requires a study of identity and oppression as an intersection of different categories. Identity “is not divided into different compartments: gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.” (Lycke 14), rather they all interact together. By only looking at gender and race, I am excluding aspects such as class which is also an important theme in the novel. Due to the limited scope of this study, gender and race were more suitable to the discussion. Adding class in a future study could, of course, give a broader perspective to the discussion of norms.

Another pedagogical limitation is the fact that the study looks at certain themes, and

proposes discussions based on these themes. By choosing certain themes I have excluded others that the students might find when reading *Sula*. Many students do not feel comfortable doing interpretation in case what they believe is wrong and what the teacher thinks is the right interpretation. One way to circumvent this is to let the students come up with other questions and themes and let them choose which ones they wish to discuss. The study presupposes certain reactions that the students might have towards the characters in the novel. The students might react in a different way and then I have to adapt the lesson to their reactions. Another limitation to the study is that it presupposes the fact that students might have preconceived stereotypes about gender and race. This means students might not have any prejudices against black women and I have to be aware of this and be careful not to supply them with stereotypes, as this would be counter-productive and damaging.

## 2. Theory

There are a number of pedagogical theories that can help a teacher with strategies to work against and make visible power structures in the classroom. However, I use norm-critical pedagogy<sup>1</sup> as the basis for my essay. The theory provides teachers with strategies to work against hierarchical imbalances between people, making it “a power-conscious pedagogy” (Bromseth and Sörensdotter 25). This theory is used to discuss gender and race norms and the possibility of using the students' reactions to raise awareness of these norms. It also facilitates the analysis of the main characters and discerns the themes in the text.

One important researcher and pedagogue in norm-critical pedagogy is Kevin K. Kumashiro. He has critically examined how schools have understood oppression and worked against it (*Troubling Education* 32). He found that there are four approaches in which oppression can be conceptualized and worked against: “education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society” (32). The first two approaches will be briefly described, while the last two will be the basis of this chapter. First the concept of *the Other* needs to be explained, Kumashiro describes it as

those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e. Othering) in society, including students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male but not stereotypically “masculine”, and students who are or are perceived to be queer. (*Troubling Education* 32)

Sörensdotter explains that without the norm we do not have the Other. They both “[p]resuppose each other and are created in relation to each other” (my translation) (138).<sup>2</sup>

Education for the Other “focuses on improving the experiences of students who are Othered” (*Troubling Education* 32), that is to say making sure that school is safe for these students by examining many different aspects that surround the school; thus making a space “for students, [...] that welcomes, educates and addresses the needs of the Other” (34).

The second approach, education about the Other, is about educating students about what the Other might represent. This is called antioppressive knowledge, that is it challenges oppression. To understand what antioppressive knowledge consists of one needs to understand what oppressive knowledge is. This involves two types of knowledge: “what society defines as 'normal' (the way things generally are) as well as what is normative (the way that things ought to be)” (39). This

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1 Translated from Swedish, i.e. *Normkritisk Pedagogik*. Norm-critical pedagogy was established in Sweden based on queer pedagogy due to its post-structuralist viewpoint and intersectional perspective. Swedish researchers argued that a more apt name was needed to highlight the intersectionality of the theory and they named it norm-critical pedagogy (Bromseth and Darj 13; Bromseth and Sörensdotter 25). In English the term used is queer pedagogy but I choose to use the Swedish concept because it is broader.

2 “[d]e båda förutsätter varandra och skapas i relation till varandra”.

implies two things: what is considered normal can become normative, which then reinforces harmful stereotypes that oppress the Other.

Education that is critical of privileging and othering asks the students and teachers to look at both groups: those that are privileged and those that are marginalized (i.e. Othered). They look at how the relationship between the privileged and the Other is “legitimized and maintained by social structures” (44), in other words, harmful stereotypes that become norms, thus creating asymmetrical power structures.

The last approach of conceptualizing oppression, education that changes students and society, is similar to the third one. They both look at those that are privileged; the difference, however, lies in how they view identity and the Other. The third approach has a structuralist and essentialist viewpoint on identity as something innate. The last one has a post-structuralist viewpoint on identity, where identity is constructed with the outside world (47). Identity is seen as complex and dynamic, constructed in a dialogue with society where only the desirable, the possible and the understandable are permitted (Bromseth 40). The third approach focuses both on the privileged and the Other; the last one focuses on the norm, rather than the Other (Bromseth 49). This one could therefore be called more specifically norm-critical pedagogy. Although there are differences in both approaches, they both look at the privileged as creators of norms.

An important concept to the theory is *norms*, which are principles “of right action binding upon the members of a group and serving to guide, control, or regulate proper and acceptable behavior” (“Norm”). This means that the group which dominates other subordinate groups (the oppressed) controls and regulates behavior through principles creating an asymmetrical power structure. This process of control and regulation is called *hegemony*; it “refers to a process of social control that is carried out through the moral and intellectual leadership of a dominant class over subordinate groups” (Gramsci, cited in Darder et al., 12). This implies that oppression is maintained through reproduction of ideas and rules (i.e. norms) by social and cultural institutions such as media, schools, family, politics and religion (Kincheloe 23). This reproduction of norms is carried out through *citing* where stereotypes, such as 'black women are over-sexual' or 'women are passive', are cited again and again creating a mythical norm (stereotype) that oppresses (*Troubling Education* 51). This procedure is damaging as these stereotypes are misconceptions, whose effects makes the person behind the stereotype doubt himself/herself as a valid human being when he/she internalizes these harmful norms (*Troubling Education* 51). To change this we can *supplement* a citation with new and positive information, thus “altering the citational practices that constitute these associations” (*Troubling Education* 52).

An important aspect of making norms visible and undermining their damaging effect is to



see how they are connected to one another and not see them as isolated. According to Lykke, working intersectionally means to

view gender, gender relations and gender identities in interplay with other sociocultural categorizations, norm producing discourses and power relations such as ethnicity, racialization, class, nationality, sexuality, dis/ability, age, etc. (14)

This means that this intersection of different categories adds complexity to the theory. We can no longer consider aspects that are involved in oppression as separate, they must be tackled together as oppression consists of many layers that might not be visible at first.

In order to analyze *Sula* and discuss it as a pedagogical resource to raise critical thinking, some specific norms are especially relevant. In particular, the feminine ideal known as “true womanhood”, which I believe still dominates women. Collins defines the concept in the following way:

[a]ccording to the cult of true womanhood that accompanied the traditional family ideal, “true” women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Propertied White women and those of the emerging middle class were encouraged to aspire to these virtues. (72)

From these cardinal rules women are supposed to be passive and submissive to men, do as they are told, never speak out, be pure, and they should stay at home and take care of the children. However, Collins states that “African-American women encountered a different set of controlling images” (72) that stem from slavery. Nevertheless, I believe that apart from the images presented by Collins, the ideals of “true womanhood” are also used today to control African American women. Of the stereotypes presented by Collins, the “Black matriarch” (Sapphire) and “Jezebel” are of great importance to my analysis. She argues that “[t]hese controlling images [stereotypes] are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life” (69).

The Black matriarchs are an assertive, “overly aggressive, unfeminine women, [who] allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands” (75). Hard-workers that are often not able to take care of their men and children, these women “encounter pressures to be submissive mammies in one setting, then are stigmatized again as matriarchs for being strong figures in their own homes” (78). “Jezebel” are sexually aggressive women whose sexuality is controlled in order to oppress them (81). Collins claims that “the jezebel [...] becomes a racialized, gendered symbol of deviant female sexuality” (83) in contrast to the white female norm of purity and passiveness. I examined how the novel deals with these norms and stereotypes, and if and how the portrayals of the characters challenge them.

I believe that looking at how Morrison's novel challenges and makes visible these stereotypes helps me do what Bartolomé mentions in her article: teachers should “aggressively name and interrogate potentially harmful ideologies and practices” so that their students can be

academically successful (264). She continues by defining a *border crosser* as a person who “will critically consider the positive cultural traits of the 'Other' and, at the same time, is able to critique the discriminatory practices of his/her culture that may be involved in the creation of the cultural 'Other' in the first place” (275).

However, there are important limitations that arise when implementing the theory. Kumashiro claims that when students are working on their awareness they can be in conflict with themselves, a so-called *crisis* (*Troubling Education* 63, 69). When someone is reflecting on the way they view the world, their thoughts and conceptions are exposed to critical examination; what they once thought as comforting and normal has now been questioned, creating an unpleasant disturbance in their lives (C.f. Bromseth).<sup>3</sup> Kumashiro poses the question if this is ethical, to let students be in a constant turmoil. On the other hand, he also considers if it is ethical not to question oppression. He also points out that just because the student and the teacher have reached a level of awareness, this does not necessarily mean that either student or teacher will change their views and act upon this awareness (48). This last limitation is important, especially in this study since it explores the possibility of the use of literature as a pedagogical resource to discuss gender and race norms. A teacher cannot take for granted that by discussing gender and race norms the students will change their views and be successful border crossers (see 3.2) where they are able to criticize their own privileged status as creator of the Other. A teacher would have to have in their arsenal strategies that would help the students' transition between awareness and change.

A second limitation is in the actual use of this theory. By stating that oppression can be combated by awareness, it implies that rationality is the only answer. This rationality demands a detachment that, as Kumashiro claims, “perpetuate[s] a mythical norm that assumes a White, heterosexual, male perspective” (49) making the Other non-rational and an outsider. The rational person speaks for the non-rational Other, thus maintaining the status quo. To avoid this, the use of literature is essential to appeal to the students' emotions. Asking the students to make an emotional connection to a story and its characters will help them make a deeper connection to the discussion of harmful stereotyping and oppression.

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<sup>3</sup> “[a]tt utmana normer som strategi i lärandeprocesser och undervisning är aldrig bekväm, eftersom det innebär att se kritiskt på sig själv, sina handlingarna och relationer” “[to challenge norms as a strategy in the learning process and teaching is never comfortable, since it involves critically looking at one's self, one's actions and concerns]” (my own translation) (Bromseth 49).

### **3. Teaching *Sula* in the classroom**

Using authentic literature in the EFL classroom has benefits and challenges; here I provide some arguments for and against this use. Finally I discuss the implications that might arise when using *Sula* to discuss gender and race norms and why I chose to analyze this novel.

#### **3.1 The use of literature in the EFL classroom**

There is a controversy about the use of authentic texts (Hedge 67-69, Brumfit and Carter 25, Collie and Slater 3-8). Many researchers argue for them because they offer a cultural enrichment for the student (Collie and Slater 4), where the student is immersed in the studied culture; and reading provides the student with authentic language, thus creating opportunities to cope with authentic situations (Hedge 67).

Other researchers argue against them for almost the same reasons. The image of culture is created by one person, thus the reading is seen through one type of lens that might skew the perception of this culture – the author has distorted reality and it can be particularly difficult to navigate through it if the teacher and students are non-native speakers (Brumfit and Carter 25-27).

Teachers have to take into consideration both sides of the argument when choosing a literary text. I have to work with my students on both linguistic and cultural skills for them to do a successful reading. Also, the students and I both have to be aware of the author's bias when reading. I think that students should be given authentic literary texts so that they get a glimpse of another culture's literary tradition. Provided I guide my learners, authentic texts should create an awareness of different views and issues of the culture.

Higher levels of linguistics and critical thinking are linked together. Researchers who argue for a development of critical reading skills state that the “ability to read critically depends on an awareness of how elements of language can be manipulated by writers, and that language learners need to build this awareness” (Hedge 199). To arrive at a meaning of a text, students need to understand what the author has written and how he/she has done it. As a student in an EFL classroom this might be difficult due to the fact that they are not native speakers (Collie and Slater 6).

Hedge advises that teachers should have a methodological responsibility with younger and more impressionable readers. As they are younger they might be more susceptible to the writer's intentions without having a critical stance. She presents principles that teachers should follow

- teachers should not use their authority as teachers as a platform for promoting their own views
- the mode of enquiry in controversial areas should have discussion rather than instruction at its core

-the discussion should protect divergence of views among participants.  
(200)

These principles present a conflicting paradox to teaching: a teacher has to be objective, yet the wording of Gy11 provides a specific mission of promoting equality. Gy11 states “[e]ducation should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based” (4). Teachers face a problem: on the one hand they have to be objective in their views and reading of the text; and on the other hand they have to impart these fundamental Western values. There is yet another level of contradiction; one between imparting specific norms that are Western and Christian and the encouragement to think critically, which attempts to examine and problematize such norms (Wyndhamn 31-33).

As stated above, the values of Gy11 are principles that teachers should follow. By following them, the journey towards anti-oppression starts. However, in order to change these power structures both Wyndhamn (14), and Kumashiro (*Troubling Education* 46) declare that the knowledge and critical thinking that a student acquires is the way to challenge and change society and the power structures that constitute it. This implies that education is central in the process of critical thinking, and it also implies that it is central in reproducing norms (Bromseth and Darj 29). A teacher has to help students be critically aware of these structures and help them think about how gender and race norms are depicted in society. A good place to start would be to use literary texts and to have open discussions and reflections with students.

An open dialogue between the teacher and the student implies using the student's knowledge when reading a text. Using dialogue as a learning process is quite fruitful when discussing literature. As a teacher you encourage your students to be part of the discussion so that they may reach an understanding through a critical reading of the text (Giroux 3). When students in the EFL classroom apply their knowledge and experience to the reading of the text they will hopefully arrive at a meaningful interpretation – that is to say, an interpretation based on a critical reading that helps raise awareness of social structures.

Even though there is a controversy about using authentic texts and how to use them, I think that my study will provide a tool for teachers when used with the method that Kumashiro puts forth (see 3.2).

### **3.2 Implications of using *Sula* in the classroom**

*Sula* is an important novel in African-American literature, it depicts the lives of two girls and their coming-of-age in a segregated and sexist community. The novel is set in the Bottom, an all-black community in Medallion, Ohio, between the era of the First World War and the Second World War.

It is called the Bottom because a white farmer had promised land to his black slave and instead of giving him fertile land at the bottom of the valley he gave him the high hard-to-work land telling him that “when God looks down, it's the bottom. [...] best land there is” (*Sula* 5).

The novel centers on the relationship between the main characters Nel and Sula from childhood to adulthood. When Sula leaves the Bottom their paths diverge in more ways than one. On returning, Sula is a changed woman; she represents what Morrison calls “metaphysically black [...] She is new world black and new world woman” (*Unspeakable Things Unspoken* 25) – a metaphysical black woman that surpasses what a black woman has been. She is different and does not fit the norm of the Bottom's community. Nel on the other hand represents the norm; she stays in her community sacrificing her dream of leaving the Bottom, marries and has babies. As a result, Nel is labeled a good woman while Sula is labeled a bad one.

The book can be used for second or third year students in upper secondary school, since older students might have a more developed level of critical thinking and are able to take a critical – and hopefully an informed – stand. There is sexual content in the book, which needs to be mentioned and worked through with the students.<sup>4</sup>

More universal themes of the novel are friendship, loss and death, creativity as a life force, a sense of community, marriage, and motherhood. More provocative themes are morals (good and bad), a controlling society, sexuality and having the right to make choices. Race and gender norms are interlaced with these themes, making it difficult to discuss these norms as separate aspects in the marginalization of these black women. Even though *Sula* might be considered far from the students' interests I believe that once the teacher and the students have identified these central themes, they will find it meaningful and easier to relate to.

I chose to analyze *Sula* because of the strong reactions that could be expected from students. Even though the book is named after Sula, she is absent for most of the novel; she appears at the end of the second chapter and dies before the book ends. This and the fact that she is thought to be immoral could influence if students like her or relate to her. Galehouse states that “[t]his comparative absence from a text that purports to be about her, coupled with the moral slipperiness of her character, makes Sula both difficult to like and difficult to know” (340). This could present a potential pedagogical problem, but it could still be the case that analyzing *Sula* can provide an appropriate place to start discussions and analysis of societal inequalities, relating to gender and race norms. A teacher has to aid the development of critical thinking and a good place to start is by

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<sup>4</sup> Sex and sexuality are difficult to talk about, especially with teenagers; this area is tricky but teachers could tackle it in an appropriate manner by being respectful and openly stating that there is some sexual content. Therefore, teachers should discuss the preconceived notions the students might have in regards to girls and their sexuality, and not discuss the actual sex scenes.

making students question their reactions and their preconceived notions about these norms. By making an emotional connection to the novel and its characters, students will use their empathy rather than their rationality (see 2.1) when raising their awareness.

Some might be offended due to Sula's assertiveness and her choices that do not correspond to expectations. Sula has been described as monstrous as she “[b]y appropriating male prerogatives [...] abandons her sex and becomes a man – a monstrous perversion of the passive 'nature' that has been socially constructed for women” (Bryant 736). Her deviation from the norm is quite important as students might not like her or the novel, thus blocking the process of raising awareness in themselves.

As this novel depicts themes that are provocative the question of relatability is presented; this is a difficulty that researchers have argued about. On the one hand researchers have found that for a successful reading the text needs to be relevant to the interests, experiences and emotions of students; this will make the reading more enjoyable and meaningful to them (Lundahl 135, Hedge 69). Collie and Slater argue that if it is enjoyable and meaningful, the reading “is more likely to have a lasting and beneficial effect upon the learners' linguistic and cultural knowledge” (6).

On the other hand, Kumashiro argues that it is not enough to focus only on drawing relevant connections to the students' own interests and life experiences. Other questions are needed, questions that help students reflect about how their perceptions of stereotypes, their own views and their expectations influence how they read a text. Students (and teachers) already have a lens with which they view the world and “they, often subconsciously, feel comfortable learning only things that map onto this worldview. That is, students often use lenses that reinforce the status quo” (*Against Common Sense* 74). Teachers therefore need to formulate questions in order to challenge the view that students have when reading. As literature can be used to get a depiction of cultural issues (Collie and Slater 4) and as an implementation to gain introspection (Kumashiro 73-74), we can see that literature can play a significant role when addressing fundamental values and critical thinking. These are important questions that have not been prominently featured in pedagogy. I strongly believe that this is a path to discover and analyze gender and race norms in *Sula*; and therefore, Kumashiro's stance is an important argument for my study.

By using questions that help clarify which type of viewpoint one has, students and teachers will become successful border crossers (see 2.1), and to help in this process one can use *Sula*. Some questions have been proposed by Kumashiro in *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Toward Social Justice* (73-74) (see Appendix 1), examples of which are used in the analysis chapter. These questions are the basis for the students' discussion, and the reactions from these discussions can then be used by teachers to broaden the students' viewpoints. However, as Kumashiro points out

people do not automatically change by having discussions (see 2.1), it might be hard for some to change the way they view the world – and that is if they change at all.<sup>5</sup> This presents another pedagogical limitation; if teachers want to change society and make students successful border crossers and they resist this change, as a teacher I can only push them so far. I have to keep an open discussion among the students and keep on “aggressively nam[ing] harmful ideologies” (Bartolomé 264).

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Bromseth (49) see 2.1.

## 4. Analysis

In this section I first analyze the characters of Nel and Sula in order to discuss certain themes in the novel pertaining to gender and race norms. These themes are: good versus bad, society as a controlling entity, sexuality, having the right to make choices, friendship, a sense of community, marriage and motherhood. Alongside each section there is a discussion about how to use the students' reactions to discuss these norms. Lastly, I discuss the complexity of the characters' portrayal in order to further explore how I can use the students' reactions in order to raise their critical thinking.

### Sula and Nel as Others

Sula and Nel are both black and women, they both “discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had to set about creating something else to be” (*Sula* 52). From being on the outside of the norms of white and male they band together to create a strong unity: their own discourse with their own norms; later this unity is disrupted by three events: Chicken Little's death, Nel's marriage and Sula's leaving the Bottom, and Sula's betrayal.

In an interview Morrison explains that Nel and Sula are two faces of one personality, they both have traits that make up one woman (Bakerman 60). Even though their gender and race make them both Others in relation to the prevailing norms, I believe that they are analyzed by critics as binary opposites. However, I also believe that their relationship is not a simple dichotomy, it is superficial because there is an overlapping of characteristics that make them complex characters. In an interview, Morrison comments on her characters' complexity: “[s]ome are good and some are bad, but most of them are bits of both” (McKay 420). This is interesting because I believe that this makes the characters seem more realistic even though their actions may be considered histrionic. Hutter proposes that even though the characters might be immoral to readers, their “violent acts can challenge the reader's sympathies if [their actions] are understood to be realistic and deliberate” (3).

### 4.1 Dichotomy of Good and Bad

#### Nel

On one side of the spectrum of the dichotomy is Nel, who represents what is morally good (Hutter 4); readers could interpret Nel as virtuous and good, betrayed by her best friend Sula. She belongs to the discourse of the community of Bottom because she marries and has children; Sula describes



her as part of “the town and all its ways” (120). Michie states that Nel's marriage places her “firmly inside the community” (163). After Nel's husband leaves she finds a job to support her children (139) and “[v]irtue, bleak and drawn, was her only mooring” (139). As Bryant comments “Nel is one of Morrison's “nurturers,” who [...] make community a reality” (739). Nel and her family is part of the community by being part of the conventional norm: as respectable black people, especially as respectable black women.

Her mother Helene plays an important role in this, as she “succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter [Nel] had” (83) and does not want Nel to be like her own mother, a Creole prostitute. Indeed, by telling her “‘I don't talk Creole’ [...] ‘And neither do you’” (27) and being glad that Nel's skin “had dusk in it” (18), Helene tells Nel that the only way to be respectable is to be pure and black. The community reinforces this norm as well, anything that disrupts their ideology is considered evil, “they dreaded the way a relatively trivial phenomenon could become sovereign in their lives” (89). Being virtuous, marrying, having children and taking care of your family becomes the prevailing hegemonistic discourse in the community and those who go against it become Others.

Nel reinforces this norm, up to a point (more on this in 4.2), she is a “nurturer” (Bryant 739) representing some of the ideals of “true womanhood” and the Black matriarch. Her sexuality is seen as part of her marriage (Holm 13) and is not mentioned much, and by the standards of the stereotype Black matriarch she is unfeminine. She is left alone to take care of her children, yet she is not there for them because she has to work thus being branded as a bad mother. Yet certain readers might probably still like Nel and considers her to be the “good” character of the book. As readers we have to question why she is considered to be good; what are the traits and actions that make Nel the “good” woman and why these are better than other traits.

This first question starts the process of thinking critically; using this novel to raise awareness about gender and race norms requires more questions that are thought provoking and that create a crisis within the student. The questions that arise from how Nel is portrayed reflect on some of the themes from the novel; they are about sense of community, marriage, motherhood, and friendship (see Appendix 3). The reactions of the students to these questions may vary when presented with Nel, as they may like or dislike her for different reasons.

First, I would ask the students before they read the book if they have any thoughts or preconceived notions about black women: about their personalities, their aspirations and their sexuality (see Appendix 2), thus highlighting the stereotypes and norms the students might have. I would then ask them if they have any stereotypes about white women (using the same questions as in Appendix 2). Next, I would compare these thoughts together to see how the students' thoughts are

citing harmful stereotypes which then reproduce norms. After reading, I would ask the students if those stereotypes and norms had any influence on the way they read the novel. To understand how these norms might influence their reading I would ask them whom they preferred or liked and why. More specifically about Nel, I would ask them how do they judge her and why (see Appendix 3).

As mentioned before, students' reactions may vary in unexpected ways and I have to be prepared for those variations. In order to avoid this, I would ask them to bring to class one question or quote about Nel that they would like to discuss. From these discussions I would use their reactions to create a contrast to Sula. This, at first, might highlight the superficial dichotomy. However, the reactions they have will help them start questioning their own discriminatory practices. By providing them with questions (like the ones in Appendix 3), the answers might supplement the stereotypes they already have with information that is not based on misconceptions. They will critically examine why certain traits in a person are more desirable and not questioned in our Swedish society over other undesirable traits, thus increasing their critical thinking and awareness about gender and race norms. However, as already mentioned (see 3.2), teachers have to take into account that the view presented by the novel is a skewed version due to the fact that this reality is created by one person, the author (Brumfit and Carter 25-27).

## **Sula**

On the other side of the spectrum is Sula (Hutter 4), who is considered to be a morally loose woman and a pariah by the community of Bottom (*Sula* 122). She does not fit the discourse of the black community because of the following reasons: she is sexually aggressive in the aspect that she uses and discards men like disposable items (115). She is not interested in settling down and having babies, but is interested in “making” herself and discovering who she is (92). Sula also betrays her best friend Nel and commits other acts that stigmatizes her and places her outside the hegemonistic discourse of the community; as Galehouse explains Sula's “resistance to what the Bottom silently (but aggressively) perceives as her duty, not only to her sex but to her race and community, calls into question the perpetuation of existence as the Bottom knows it” (354).

Sula goes against, not only the ideals of “true womanhood”, but the norms of the black community of the Bottom as well. She is active and makes her own choices, answers only to herself and is self-concerned. Because of her defiance and the questions that her portrayal evokes she is a character that many might not like or relate to. Bryant states that

Sula's own rootlessness and disdain for signifiers of stability in her culture, such as motherhood and marriage, are stolen privileges reserved for men. Sula is, therefore, an anathema to the community because she threatens traditional gender arrangements which, despite the obvious way these assigned roles restrict female autonomy, are approved by the general community. (736)

However, she might – up to a point (more on this in 4.2) – be considered to reinforce the stereotype Jezebel. The fact that Sula is unapologetic about her sexuality could strike a cord of disturbance in the reader. It is therefore important to question why we, as readers, may have the same tendency to judge Sula the same way that the community does. A more frightening question might be what it says about us when we “other” Others; aspects that we repress and deny in ourselves, we nevertheless project them onto Others, thus repressing them into an asymmetrical power structure.

The questions that arise with Sula's portrayal are the same as Nel's, however, the answers might be more provocative because Sula defies the norms. Therefore, we can assume that the answers from the discussions might be used to widen the view that the students' might have. The questions also represent the themes of the novel, for example “[w]hat does it mean to be good? What is evil? What does it mean to be a friend? What is love?” (Nissen 264). Having started with a general discussion already before with Nel, in class I would continue straight into questions specifically about Sula (see Appendix 4). Questions that provoke the student to pinpoint exactly why he/she does like or does not like Sula: why is Sula called a “slut”, a “bitch”, a “roach”, and a “witch” by the community of the Bottom (112-118). An important question would be how they judge her and why. Answers to this question might vary and might provoke heated discussions, but most importantly students will have to voice their own preconceived notions. This will, hopefully, create a crisis within the students in order for them to think critically about how norms are created.

I am hoping that the students will react strongly to Sula as it will provide me with a resource that will disrupt the way they view the world. As Kumashiro has pointed out students will often read something that confirms the way they view the world (*Against Common Sense* 71-72) and to change oppression we need a disruptive education that unsettles and causes crisis in the students (*Troubling Education* 11). I would use their reactions to discuss why certain traits or behavior are more accepted, and to “think critically about the notion that it is 'only natural' that people think about differences in only certain ways, and to ask, Why and how has society come to think about racial norms and [gender] differences in these ways?” (82). This means that we will be looking at the discriminatory process of why certain stories are told and how, when we do talk about differences, they are only told in a certain way. By providing different stories that are told in many different ways we start to supplement hegemonistic discourses in order to change them. The students are not only looking at the Other, they are also looking at the norm and how it is constructed, thus becoming successful border crossers.

I believe that analyzing and reacting to Sula's portrayal is a great way to start discussing norms; as Morrison puts it Sula is disruptive, unpolicing and an outlaw – “a new world black and a new world woman” (*Unspeakable Things Unspoken* 25). Sula is a new type of black woman that

challenges norms and stereotypes by breaking or ignoring all the laws of the community of the Bottom (Step 14).

## 4.2 Complexity of the dichotomy

As mentioned before, I believe that the relationship between Nel and Sula is a much more complex one that undermines the dichotomy that many place on their relationship. As readers, we have to ask ourselves why we think in binary terms when we analyze these characters. It is problematic to think in dichotomies, because it over-simplifies harmful stereotypes that oppress people (cf. Collins 72); thus analyzing them as the Jezebel, the Black matriarch and by the “true womanhood” ideals we create one-dimensional characters that are oppressed, and any other women that might identify themselves with them will also internalize these harmful stereotypes. I believe that both characters challenge gender and race norms through their complex portrayal. Morrison creates two ways in which she undermines this dichotomy: presenting the characters as two faces of one personality and creating complex characters that have a deeper story.

Morrison undermines the dichotomy by portraying Nel and Sula as two faces of one person. In an interview, Morrison states that Nel is attracted to Sula because Sula represents adventure and creativity, the same things her mother tries to scrub off of her: “Nel wants it [adventure and creativity] anyway, which makes it possible for her to have a very close friend who is so different from her, in the way she looks at life” (Step 13). This attraction means that they sought each other out, even before they met, in dreams:

[t]hey were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream. (*Sula* 51)

Morrison continues to say that this attraction was her way of expressing that they each had qualities and traits that both had and lacked at the same time and “if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person” (Step 13). Being compared as one person suggests that good and bad exists in the same person at the same time. If a character is portrayed as being both good and bad, it is hard to categorize the character as a one-dimensional stereotype.

The second way Morrison makes us question this superficial dichotomy is by creating complex characters; they are not stereotypes or one-dimensional characters. Morrison mentions that with *Sula* she wanted to write about “good and evil, but putting it in different terms” (Step 12). The characters are complex due to the fact that they have experienced events, which they have no control over, that have molded their identity; their reactions and the reactions of others have also contributed to form their identity. This coincides with the post-structuralist viewpoint on identity which is created in a dialogue with society (*Troubling Education* 47). Society has an important role

in deciding what is allowed or not allowed into the discourse; what is not allowed is othered into an oppressed group. The questions that arise also inform us that these characters are not simple, they make us question how we would react and act if presented with these events. They question the way we perceive the world and how we view good and bad. By questioning different aspects of life we undermine harmful stereotypes and this is what norm-critical theory wants teachers and students to do (Bromseth and Darj 13).

The novel questions what is good and bad through Sula's and Nel's actions. Their sexuality, the choices they make concerning marriage and motherhood, and their friendship are the basis for these questions. I believe that Morrison is not interested in preaching to her readers which side is better – i.e. to marry or not to marry, to be sexually active or not sexually active – rather she is interested in problematizing the fact that there is this idea that one of these life choices is better than the other. Holm remarks that the way Morrison writes “breaks with the perception of sex [and other issues such as marriage, motherhood, death etc.] as something filthy and immoral [or pure and moral], and illuminates these aspects of life without being swayed by the more conventional norms” (5). Apart from the questions provided in Appendices 3 and 4, I would include more general questions (see Appendix 5) that will help increase students' critical thinking. I would also bring into account different events that highlight the complexity of the characters and prepare questions for the students. The different events that would help demonstrate their complexity are: Chicken Little's death, Sula's betrayal, and Nel's and Sula's last scene together.

### **Chicken Little's death**

One important event that unsettles both the reader and this dichotomy of good and bad is the death of Chicken Little (61-66). Chicken Little is a young boy that drowned in the lake when he was playing with Sula and Nel. Nel believes up until the end of the novel, that she has nothing to do with his death yet after the last meeting with Eva (Sula's grandmother) she walks away troubled:

[w]hat did Eva mean by *you watched*? How could she help seeing it? She was right there. But Eva didn't say *see*, she said *watched*. “I did not watch it. I just saw it.” But it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped. She hadn't wondered about that in years. “Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?” (170)

This shows that Nel did have a part in his death, by simply standing there and watching she does not actively try to help him. As readers, we have to ask what does this mean: why does Nel take pleasure seeing him drown. We might not be able to answer this question, but it opens a new introspection into Nel's moral goodness. The question then becomes if she is still morally good and part of the community's discourse even though she is part of his death (more questions see Appendix 6). These questions highlight the complexity of the characters and question how a black

woman is supposed to be. Nel is not the nurturing Black matriarch that the readers might at first believe, but is complicated and has a story that defines who she is as a black woman. It is difficult to say if either Nel or Sula should be judged as morally bad over an event that is out of their control: at the time they were children and they had no support from family. Maybe, the answers and the discussions between the students will help change the perception of Nel and Sula. Hopefully, the students will react to them and a discussion on race and gender norms will be possible.

### **Sula's betrayal**

Another event that weakens the dichotomy is Sula's betrayal, as it provides questions about friendship and society's morals (more questions see Appendix 7). The community of Bottom sanctions Sula as a morally loose woman and as a reader we might accept this image. So when Sula sleeps with Nel's husband we consider this a betrayal and thus a crime against friendship. We sympathize with Nel and judge Sula. Later on, we hear Sula's side of the story: she truly believes that she meant no harm when she slept with Nel's husband (119). Morrison raises the question that nothing is as simple as it looks: Sula is not a Jezebel, a calculating sexual tigress, but she also has a story that explains how she came to be this new black woman.

### **Last scene between Nel and Sula**

The last event that strengthens the complexity of the characters and questions gender and race norms is the last scene between Nel and Sula:

“You can't have it all, Sula.” Nel was getting exasperated with her arrogance, with her lying at death's door still smart-talking.

“Why? I can do it all, why can't I have it all?”

“You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't.”

“You repeating yourself.”

“How repeating yourself?”

“You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?”

“I don't think so and you wouldn't either if you had children.” (142)

Sula raises the question of race and gender equality: why it is not the same being a black woman as it is being a white man. To her, black women are equal to white men; they should be allowed to be independent, make their own choices and have it all. To Nel it is the opposite, black women “can't do it all” (142). As readers we have to ask why Nel asserts the norm imposed by the hegemonic discourse of Bottom, by thinking that black women “can't do it all”. The question is if she is suppressed into thinking like this or if she is aware that by going against the norm you become othered, and being othered means you are alone. We can ask the same of Sula: if she is aware that her actions other her and she blatantly continues to do what she likes; or if she is suppressed into

being the other because of her actions. This opens up how the reader might interpret both characters' portrayals. If both are aware that norms dictate and oppress black women, then their actions might be seen as a way to survive their society. The question then becomes if the reader can – or even should – blame or judge either women for their actions. Other questions to ask are what Sula and Nel gained from their lives, respectively, such as whether their achievements could be compared, and how and why they are similar or different.

### **How to use students' reactions**

Before discussing how to use the students' reactions to work against gender and race norms, teachers should be aware of some limitations. Working with the questions in class could present problematic areas. These are provocative questions that the students might not want to answer for various reasons. They might not have thought about these questions before and therefore they do not have answers. They might not relate to the themes of the novel, the characters or to the questions for the discussions. They might feel too uncomfortable to examine their own prejudices and discuss them with others in class. They are too shy and insecure in their language skills to feel that they can discuss such matters. Teachers have to be aware of these factors and not expect a discussion when they first broach it; they may have to work with this novel over a period of time to establish trust and open communication. Teachers have to have an open dialogue with their students (Giroux 3); this demands an interaction between teacher and student that facilitates critical thinking (hooks 9). It also demands a considerate preparation of the students' ability to think critically; teachers have to arduously prepare students, especially young ones, to critically analyze the novel and its characters and to resist the possible interpretation of the simple dichotomy that Sula and Nel might represent.

Other aspects to consider are that the reactions may vary in unexpected ways and therefore teachers might have to provoke the students into a crisis. This, in itself, is problematic: if teachers have a methodological responsibility towards their students (Hedge 200), how ethical is it to perpetrate a crisis in them. However, Kumashiro does argue that it is not ethical not to question oppression (*Troubling Education* 69). Another aspect is that there might be a backlash from the discussions. People who are put on the spot to voice their inner most thoughts will most likely act defensively and angrily, so that teachers have to tread lightly. The students might need to write down their thoughts in diary-form and then as they get more comfortable they can discuss in smaller groups. These discussions might also have to be conducted in their mother tongue to engage the students to voice their thoughts and to make them feel more at ease.

If students react strongly to the discussion, teachers are then able to use their reactions to question the ideals of “true womanhood” and the stereotypes of the Black matriarch and Jezebel. To be able to pin-point the students' preconceived notions through a crisis is what norm-critical pedagogy intends to do. Through discussions based on the questions, teachers can work with the students to raise an awareness about how and why gender and race norms are created and asserted. hooks argues that students (and teachers) gain new knowledge through information that is shared in discussions (44). With new knowledge comes new insight which then facilitates the acquisition of critical thinking that changes asymmetrical power structures (Wyndhamn 14, *Troubling Education* 46). To be able to critically examine different stories and to supply them with new information, students are able to undermine harmful stereotypes and they can become successful border crossers. These discussions might be structured due to the fact that questions are proposed; however, teachers should encourage students to think of more questions and thoughts about the novel.



## 5. Conclusion

The fundamental values associated with preventing discriminatory practices and the goal of critical thinking mentioned in Gy11 are part of teaching. Therefore, my study explores the possibility of using *Sula* by Toni Morrison as a pedagogical resource to facilitate critical thinking in students in order to raise awareness about gender and race norm. Norm-critical pedagogy was used in order to carry out the aims of the study: to analyze how the main characters Nel and Sula are portrayed with regard to gender and race norms; to discern the questions that arose from specific themes (morals, society that controls, sexuality, the right to make choices, friendship, a sense of community, marriage and motherhood); and lastly how to use the reactions from students in order to raise awareness.

The study shows how Morrison deals with norms and stereotypes: Nel and Sula are portrayed as complex characters and being two faces of one personality. These two ways of portraying characters questions the superficial dichotomy of good and bad that might be imposed on them by readers. The questions that arose from the certain themes also aided in analyzing this complexity. These inquiries questioned how and why society (and the reader) can other and oppress black women. They also questioned what is regarded as good and bad, thus problematizing dichotomies that reproduce harmful stereotypes. By showing how complex they are we undermine harmful stereotypes that cause oppression. Therefore, we can presume that using *Sula* could be a constructive and productive pedagogical resource in order to facilitate critical thinking in students. Teachers and students need to problematize questions and issues about our society if we want an anti-oppressive education.

Even if the questions presented in the appendices might, at first glance, reinforce the idea of a simple good and bad dichotomy, they are supposed to be the base for discussions. By answering them, the students will hopefully conclude that neither character is as simple as good or bad. Hopefully, they will understand that there is more to Nel and Sula than simple stereotypes. By having characters that question and go against the norm teachers will be able to have discussions with their students about gender and race norms, thus helping students in their development of critical thinking. The questions could lead the students to a certain reading; to avoid this, teachers must include in the discussion-based lesson questions and thoughts that the students have on the characters and the events in the novel.

As mentioned before (see 1.2), a limitation to the study is the fact that it is based on presuppositions of possible reactions from students. These are based on research, however, students might react too strongly or not strongly enough. Therefore, teachers will have to adapt and modify

their lessons. Another limitation is the presupposition that students will change their point of view when thinking critically, as research claims this might not happen. Students are more comfortable learning what already fits their point of view which reinforces asymmetrical power structures (*Against Common Sense* 74), thus defeating the purpose of norm-critical pedagogy.

Further research that would be interesting would be to add the categories of class and disabilities when analyzing *Sula*. Analyzing norms about poor and disabled black people would add another dimension to the students' discussion about oppression. These categories would add the aspect of intersectionality that is essential to norm-critical pedagogy. Another aspect that is interesting to do further research on, would be to carry out this study with students to see their real reactions and then discuss the findings with norm-critical pedagogy research. An important aspect that would have been intriguing to add would be a discussion to as why the novel might not be relatable to Swedish students. However, the scope of this study does not permit these interesting ideas.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

Kumashiro's questions from his book *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Towards Social Justice*:

Why do we say that some interpretations are more correct than others? What lenses might some people have used to arrive to these interpretations? What results when we say that these interpretations are not only objective, but also most correct? That is, whose lenses, experiences, perspectives, and questions get silenced, and whose interpretations become the norm or standards to which all other readings must conform? [...] What stereotypes did the students believe before reading the novel, and how did those stereotypes influence the ways that they read it? Were some stereotypes challenged, and were new ones created? Did the students pay attention to some things more than others? When were their expectations met or not met, and how did that make them feel about what they were reading? Why did they find certain characters or events more likeable or believable than others? How does the novel complicate the ways they think about racial identity, discrimination, and race relation? What does the novel suggest that they themselves need to work on if they are to work towards social justice in their own lives? (73-74)

## Appendix 2

Specific questions before reading:

- Is there a specific way a woman should be? Why? Is it different for black woman? Why?
- What do you think of when you see or read about a black woman? What are your first thoughts?
- Are they different from white women? If so, how? Why? Who decides this? Why do they have the power to decide?
- Do you judge them? If so, how? Why?

## Appendix 3

Questions about Nel:

- How do you react to her? Do you dislike her? Or like her? Why?
- What are her traits?
- Is she a good person in the community? If so, why? Or is she a bad person in the community? If so, why?
- What are the actions that supports this argument? Do you think the color of her skin influences her sense of community? Would it be different if she was a white man? Why?
- Is her sense of community strong or weak? Why are they strong? Why are they weak?
- Is she a good daughter? Or a bad daughter? Why is she a good daughter? Why is she a bad daughter? Do you think it would be different if she was a white man? Why?

- Is she a good friend? Or a bad friend? Why is she a good friend? Why is she a bad friend?
- What are the signifiers that denote how a good or bad friend is? Why is that? Is it different if she was a white man? Why?
- What are your thoughts on her marriage? Does the color of her skin influence this? Why?
- Is she a good mother? Why? Is she a bad mother? Why? Is it different for fathers? Why? Does the color of her skin influence this? Why?
- How does she represent love? Is she lovable? Is she loving? If yes, why? If not, why? Is it different for men? Why? Does the color of her skin influence this?
- How would you describe her sexuality? Why? Do you think her sexuality is different because she is a black woman? Why? Would it be different if she was a white woman, or white man? Why?
- Does she have a lot of choices? Does she make her own choices? Or are they decided for her by others? Do you think the color of her skin influences this? Do you think a white woman's right to make her own choices are different than a black woman's? Do you think it would be different if she was a white man? Why?
- What experiences influence her identity? How does she react to these events? Why do you think she reacts that way? Do you think her being black makes her react differently?
- Do you judge her? How? Why? Would you judge differently if she was a white man?

## Appendix 4

### Questions about Sula:

- How do you react to her? Do you dislike her? Or like her? Why? What are the events that supports your arguments?
- What are her traits? Do they make her more likeable? Or not at all?
- Is she a good person in the community? If so, why? Or is she a bad person in the community? If so, why?
- What are the actions that supports this argument? Do you think the color of her skin influences her sense of community? Would it be different if she was a white man? Why?
- Is her sense of community strong or weak? Why are they strong? Why are they weak?
- Is she a good daughter? Or a bad daughter? Why is she a good daughter? Why is she a bad daughter? Do you think the color of her skin influences her actions as a daughter? Why? Is it different for men? Why?

- Is she a good friend? Or a bad friend? Why is she a good friend? Why is she a bad friend?
- What are the signifiers that denote how a good or bad friend is? Why is that? Is it different for men? Why?
- Why do you think she does not marry? Why does this go against the norm of the community? Is it different for men? Why? Do you think the color of her skin influences this? Why?
- Why do you think she does not want any children? Why does this go against the norms of the community? Is it different for men? Why? Does the color of her skin influence this? Why?
- How does she represent love? Is she lovable? Is she loving? If yes, why? If not, why? Would it be different if she was a white woman, or white man? Why?
- How would you describe her sexuality? Why does it go against the norm? Do you think it differs from Nel? Do you think her sexuality is different because she is a black woman? Why? Would it be different if she was a white woman, or white man? Why?
- Why is her sexuality judged?
- Does she have a lot of choices? Does she make her own choices? Or are they decided for her by others? Do you think the color of her skin influences this? Do you think a white woman's right to make her own choices are different than a black woman's? Is it different for men? Why?
- What experiences influence her identity? How does she react to these events? Why do you think she reacts that way? Do you think her being black makes her react differently?
- Do you judge her? How? Why? Would you judge her differently if she was a white man? Why?
- Why does society judge her?

## Appendix 5

General questions before reading:

- Is there a specific way a woman should be? If so, how and why? Who decides this? Why do they have the power to decide?
- Do women have to follow a set of morals? Do they differ from men's? Should they differ? If so, why?
- Who decides what is moral or immoral? Why?

## Appendix 6

- Do you judge Nel and Sula over this event? If so, why? If not, why? If it had been two white boys, would it be different? If so, why?
- Does Nel's involvement in Chicken Little's death conflict with the view that you have with Nel? If so, how and why?
- Does being morally good or bad belong to a certain gender? Does it belong to a certain race? If so, why? If not, why?
- How good of a friend is Nel towards Sula: do we consider what Nel does to Sula a betrayal? If yes, why is that? If not, why is that?
- How does friendship look like between two women? Why do you think it looks like that? Is it different between two men? Why?
- Does this view conflict with the view you have on how women should be? If so, how and why?

## Appendix 7

- Do you think this incident would have happened in a friendship between men? If so, why? If not, why?
- Do you think that these incidents are more frequent or less frequent in a friendship between women compared to men? If so, why? If not, why?
- Do you think this incident has anything to do with her gender? Why? Why not? With her race? Why? Why not?
- Reading page 119 and the description of Sula's inner mind, do you think it explains her behavior? If so, why? If not, why? Does it excuse her? Why? Why not?

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