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WHY FORM AND CONTENT SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*.

Traumatized narrative and interplay.

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Abstract

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to investigate the interplay between narrative form and content in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and demonstrate how this interaction is an important part of the creation of meaning in the novel. The study employs a structural-narratological method in the formal analysis. Trauma theory is employed in the analysis of the characters.

Keywords: trauma narrative, ellipsis, structuralism, fragmented narrative, transgenerational phantom

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1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019), the first African American winner of the Nobel prize in 1993, is an author whose novels describe the historical traumas of the African American community from the times of slavery until the 2000s. The characters of Morrison's novels live segregated from white society, and a majority of them experience both social alienation and inner pain due to previous traumas. In Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, published in 1973, we are presented with a black community, ironically named the Bottom, despite the fact that it is located up in the hills. We get to know characters in the novel that are sick, poor and traumatized.

A striking formal characteristic of Morrison's writing is her fragmentary story-telling (Peach 102). This structural feature is manifested, for example, in elliptical narratives with many gaps in the narration. A corresponding, "incomplete" (or "cracked") feature can be found in Morrison's characterization, in that her novels depict characters that are fragmented by trauma due to previous repression and violence (Atlas 66).

Regarding the 'cracked' characterisation and the fragmented narrative form of her novels, Morrison's fiction relates to real life matters. Structurally and formally, this feature could be interpreted partly as a reflection of the historical record of the African American experience, with its many gaps in the historical account (Rohrkemper 52). As for the narrative content of her fiction, Morrison aims to provide a historical and social insight into the suffering of the black people. An essential part of her writing can be seen as an attempt to give voice to those who have been left out and ignored in previous African-American fiction and history writing, (Stayton 26), to connect the slave narrative with the "twentieth-century African – American fiction" (Page 21), and to juxtapose the factual narratives of the *Black book* and the *Black archive* with her own fiction (Pipkin 14). Consequently, the current investigation argues that Morrison's 'cracked' characterisation depicts traumatized characters in a fictional world and

simultaneously refers, indirectly and to some extent, to trauma affected individuals of the African American community. We can thus establish that there is a correlation between reality and fiction and between form and content in Morrison's novel writing (Page 31).

In the subsequent investigation, the terms "incomplete", "fragmented", "cracked", "broken", "unfinished" and "split" are used in order to describe *Sula*, regarding both to content and form. These terms are not referred to in a negative sense. On the contrary, this feature of Morrison's writing is seen as a deliberate and productive technique, which makes it possible to reach beyond a literal interpretation of her narratives. (Page 33). Thus, an underlying notion of the present study is that Morrison's fragmented narrative is the author's aim to depict a substantial, more complete picture of the Afro-American reality.

In a study of Morrison's fragmented story-telling, it is fruitful to situate her writing in a postmodern context. Not at least because such a disposition will help us to expound the differences and similarities between the postmodern narration and the trauma narrative found in Morrison's novels. The distinction also helps to establish and confirm the research topic. However, as we will see below, Morrison's narrative approach and the postmodern, have different motives to why they employ a certain narrative device. A recurrent manifestation in the postmodern novel is fragmentation and the unfinished, regarding both to plot and characterisation. Although, in postmodern aesthetics, authentic representation is rejected (Culler 872ff). Morrison truly stands against this latter condition in her work. She rather aims to mediate an authentic, repressed and often painful, part of the Afro-American history to her readers (Page 157-158). In "The site of Memory" Morrison explains that the authenticity of her work results from the fact that a large part of her "literary heritage is the autobiography", e.g. the "slave narratives" (85). Morrison employs some of the postmodern narrative tools in her story-telling, i.e. the "postmodern fragmented narrative" (Chabot Davis 86); even though, she goes a step beyond the postmodern prescriptions and "reworks the postmodern condition"

(Page 158). In *Sula*, this tendency is reflected in the fact that the author's fragmented narrative tends to make the plot even more real and authentic. The main reason for this 'authentic making' is the interplay that occurs between a (traumatized) narrative and a (traumatized) content, both of which cooperate in the formation of narrative meaning in *Sula*. Within the current framework of investigation, this assumption implies, to some degree, that in plain postmodern story-telling, the narrative ellipses do not, necessarily, refer distinctively to the story or even interact with the content, simply because they do not always deal with traumatized characters.

A further postmodern feature in Morrison's novel writing is "polyvocality". This theoretical concept, which also has an important role in trauma fiction, embraces the notion that several narrative voices are being used to tell a specific narrative event. The postmodern, at times, free-floating, collective and polyvocal (in comparison to the modern more steady and fixed) narrator, implies a narrator's voice which changes form and position throughout the narrative. (Sniader-Lanser 125).

In *Sula*, the author depicts emotionally scarred ('cracked') characters in a fragmented narrative that repeatedly omits explanations of how/why events occurs/have occurred: "the narrator [of *Sula*] underexplains and leaves the most important narrative events to the realm of mystery" (Sniader-Lanser 132). If interpreted literally, the narrative could easily be interpreted as poor, which, as we will see, is not the case.

2. Aim and structure of study

The aim of this dissertation is to bring together the two aspects mentioned above, formal and content-based, and demonstrate how they interact in the creation of meaning in *Sula*. A thesis of this investigation is that the formal fragmentation in the novel affects the interpretation of the "cracked" characters, and vice versa, and that the interplay that emerges,

as a result of the interaction, creates the meaning of the novel.

The overreaching theoretical perspective of this work is structural-narratological in that it studies narrative elliptical representation, both regarding to content (elliptical characterisation) and to form (narrative ellipsis). An investigative assumption is that the narrative portraiture in *Sula*, to some extent, can be sorted under the heading 'structural'. The formal analysis is carried out using terms from the structural narratology of Gérard Genette, which is presented in chapter 4. The examination of the content implies an analysis of what is presented as the lived experiences of the characters. Given the fact that the novel is almost lacking in direct characterization, the following study will mainly put its focus on the indirect characterization: character's speech and thoughts, how they affect each other and their actions. In this dissertation, the content of *Sula* is analysed by using Trauma theory. An assumption of this work is that the characterisation of Shadrack and of Sula can be comprehended with the help of Trauma theory. This will be further developed in chapter 5, where three subheadings are employed in the analysis:

5.1. Narrative detachment in the characterisation of Sula.

5.2. Narrative dissociation in the characterisation of Shadrack.

5.3. African expressions and the transgenerational phantom.

The analysis procedure implies that a specific trauma expression/symptom is presented; its narrative counterpart is pointed out, and finally, these two aspects are brought together and contextualized. Chapter 5 also aims to clarify how the interplay conveys a considerable part of the novel's meaning. In chapter 5.3., an alternative reading of *Sula* is proposed. The analysis procedure is preceded by a more general discussion about time and chapter division, which will help us to approach the fundamental analysis.

3. Literature review and topic of investigation

Relevant for the subsequent discussion are works that investigate Morrison's style of writing from a trauma perspective, and that, to some degree, comprise an exposition of the author's omission of narrative information. In this dissertation, Morrison's writing technique is seen as a deliberate choice. Commenting on a prayer in *The Bluest Eye*, she perceives the interplay between form and content: "As I began developing parts out of pieces, I found that I preferred them unconnected - to be related but not to touch, to circle, not line up because the story of this prayer was the story of a shattered, fractured perception resulting from a shattered, splintered life" (In "Memory, creation and writing" 388). The author has similar thoughts about *Sula* in *New Republic*: "I thought of *Sula* as a cracked mirror, fragments and pieces we have to see independently and put together" (Interview 1981).

In *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (2000), J. Brooks Bouson describes how trauma novels "employ a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences to emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the [traumatic] experience" (159). Bouson examines the author's "meandering narrative style" (19) and puts forward that Morrison "seems driven to speak the unspeakable in her fiction" (18) and that she reveals "traumatic secrets" (19) by repeatedly producing "narrative fragments" in her story-telling (19). The critic also gives an account for the traumatic effect on individuals, for instance dissociation and flashbacks (7). Further, she points out that "trauma can be transmitted intergenerationally" (8) and concludes that *Sula* is suffering from "emotional disconnection" (65).

In *Too Terrible to Relate: Dynamic Trauma in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, (2017), Corey Stayton has a chapter about *Sula* called "Trauma in the Bottom", in which he concludes that "In *Sula*, various traumas are evident" (51). He points out that *Sula* is "marked by trauma" by all the "traumatic events" that she experiences (72), which leaves her "detached from others"

(71). Moreover, the commentator argues that Morrison's writing technique implies "incomplete historical narratives" and that the author "purposefully leaves gaps in time", so that the reader becomes more involved in the story-telling (51). Stayton also addresses the fact that a traumatic event has indeterminate causes and consequences (18).

In *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* (1995), Philip Page argues that Morrison's novels "create a plurality – in – unity between reader, text, character, narrators, and author" (4), a notion that "parallel[s] postmodern theories" (6). He puts forth that Morrison explores a kind of "splitness" (31) which can be traced both in the narrative form and in the "characters' fragmented psyches" (30-32). The commentator also points out that Morrison's novels employ a multitude of narrative voices and therefore transcend "any one perspective" (31). Furthermore, he describes "the technique of suspension" (33) and how the author tends to depict only a small part of a fictional event, and then repeatedly returns to the description, explaining it further. For this reason, according to Page, readers of Morrison's novels "must not jump too early to conclusions" (34). Moreover, he argues that Sula "More than any of the other characters [in *Sula*] suffers from dislocation of self and other" (73).

Linden Peach, in *Toni Morrison* (1995), suggests that Gérard Genette's structural-narratological theory is suitable as a method in the analysis of Morrison's narrative technique (16). Peach points out that the author is drawn "toward to the dramatic potential of enigma, distances, spaces, dislocation, alienation, gaps and ellipses" (17). The commentator also argues that – in order to achieve a complete understanding of Morrison's writing, it is necessary to "place a greater value than previously on incompleteness, disruption, confusion, contradiction, internal inconsistencies and unfilled expectations" (20). Moreover, Peach suggests a relation between form and content: "Morrison's innovative form is driven by its radical content" (22).

Previous research that is valid for the study at hand does not have the same research topic as this investigation. In this essay, my ambition is to provide an analysis whose focus is on the interplay between the formal and content-based fragmentation and also to exemplify how this interaction defines the meaning of *Sula*. The current study finds its significance in its attempt to provide an analysis that focuses on the interplay. In previous research, such an approach has not been applied, and the two aspects described have mainly been examined separately. Admittedly, in certain cases, e.g. as Peach suggests, these aspects have been used in a similar way. But usually, these works do not point out the interplay as the central mechanism in the novel's creation of meaning. In the introduction, I pointed out a specific feature of Morrison's trauma novel, and that 'her genre' – and perhaps Trauma novel in general (Balaev 162ff) – owes its meaning to the above-mentioned interplay.

4. Method and key concepts

The present study is mainly informed by structural-narratological theory and Trauma theory. This chapter gives a brief account of the historical background of trauma research, and then it displays these two theories. Ultimately, this essay's use of Gérard Genette's narrative theory will be delineated.

The connection between trauma event and mental illness was first investigated by Jean Martin Charcot, a French neurologist, who was studying traumatized women. Though, trauma theory is maybe "best associated with the 19th century research of Sigmund Freud" (Stayton 22). Freud's work draws on Charcot's investigations (See Herman 10-20, for a more extensive account).

The analysis of *Sula* involves some basic notions from trauma theory taken from Judith Lewis Herman's insightful book *Trauma and recovery* (2015). Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's concepts *phantom* and *transgenerational* are also central for this essay. In her trauma

research, Herman argues that “People who have endured horrible events [traumatic events] suffer predictable psychological harm” (3). According to the trauma researcher, trauma symptoms, i.e. denial and dissociation, affect the traumatized person’s life both on an individual and collective level (2). Her account also points out that trauma victims often feel unable to find a “normal course of their lives”, because “the trauma repeatedly interrupts” (37) and forces the trauma-affected person into a condition of “emotional detachment” and dissociative states (42-43). In order to avoid and control these disorganized thoughts and feelings, trauma victims repeatedly feel constrained to act out the original trauma event (reenactment), and often take to alcohol and drugs in order to avoid this repetitive pattern (39-44). Herman explains how trauma victims often withdraw from social activities (55).

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok argue that traumas get stored in our minds when we are unable to process them (Yassa 83). They have given the remainder the name “phantom”. The phantom points “to a gap, that is, to the unspeakable” (Abraham & Rand 290). Abraham and Torok claim that if the phantom is not treated (in psychotherapy), it will be passed on from one generation to another, i.e., “transgenerationally transmitted” (Yassa 83). Abraham writes that: “The phantom passes from the parent’s unconscious into the child’s” (Abraham & Torok 173). During this continuous process through generations, the original trauma will manifest itself in different forms (Yassa 83). In *Sula*, the transgenerational phantom is highly notable. It can be found, for example, in Sula's own family. This theme will be developed further in the analysis.

Literary trauma theory, originally formulated by Kali Tal and Cathy Caruth in the middle of the 1990s’, is founded on Trauma theory, and is linked to Freud’s early work on hysteria, i.a. due to the fact that he frequently turned to literature when he analysed the traumatic experience. According to Caruth, Freud did that “because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is that specific

point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytical theory of traumatic experience precisely meet” (3).

Literary trauma theory refers to, to some extent, novels in which the narrator depicts characters who have experienced severe loss and fear (Balaev 150); and that have a narrative that represents traumatic conditions via “narrative innovations” such as “narrative omission” and “nonlinear plot” (Balaev 159). Balaev contends that the trauma novel obtains its meaning from “the interplay that occurs between language, experience, memory and place” (149). It is also important to know that Trauma literature can refer to literature that does not depict traumatized characters.

On a formal level, traumatic experience manifests itself in the narrative, (as well as through the language and actions of the characters). Narrative technique can inscribe traumatic experience formally: “Traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention” (Tal 6). Toni Morrison’s *Sula* is a clear example of the trauma narrative: Sula “with its repeated scenes of violence, replicates the disrupted, fragmented trauma narrative” (Bouson 49). A manifestation of the formal fragmentation in the trauma narrative is the elliptical narrative: “narrative ellipses must also be viewed as rhetorical strategies that convey the assorted meanings of trauma in fiction. These strategies help the author structure the narrative into a form that attempts to embody the psychological “action” of traumatic memory or dissociation” (Bouson 159). In the narrative, the traumatic condition is expressed through: “a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences to emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience” (Balaev 159).

In trauma narratives, the story-telling often appears to be fragmented, which can be expressed through, for example, narrative omissions. These “narrative ellipses” may appear to be empty spaces with no information at all, but they also fill an important meaning-carrying

function: “the analysis of ellipsis comes down to considering the story time elided” (Genette, *Narrative discourse* 106). Aiming to get a deeper understanding of how the elliptical narrative functions in *Sula*, the present study will employ the Genettean narratological terms, l'histoire and le récit. The actual telling (of the story) Genette calls le récit (the narrative); and the story, l'histoire is the narrative's source from where the narrative departs (*Narrative discourse Revisited* 13-14). I.e., Genette uses l'histoire (story) “for the signified or narrative content”, and le récit (narrative) “for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself” (Genette, *Narrative discourse* 27). The French literary theorist also employs the term narration (narrating) “for the producing narrative action” (ibid). The narrator is, according to Genette, the narrative instance that is telling the story (*Narrative discourse* 212ff).

The telling of a story always implies a choice of a narrative; it is pointless only re-telling the story. In Toni Morrison's work the story is constantly reorganized. Peach claims that in *Sula* the story broken up in the telling “and rearranged so that characters are not even presented in relation to each other in ways that make immediate or complete sense” (16). The two major narrative ellipses in *Sula*, accounted for in this study, concern narrative time and narrative information about why certain events occur or not occur; or about why some characters act, feel or communicate the way they do.

5. Analysis

What primarily attracts attention regarding the formal fragmentation is surely *Sula*'s omission of and division in time. Though a short novel, only 174 pages in the edition examined here, *Sula* covers a historical period lasting 45 years, from 1920 to 1965. To describe these 45 years, the narrator uses 11 chapters, all named a specific year. The narrative accounts for many individual years in quite a few pages. Some years are described directly in the narrative, but others not. To some extent, this structural condition is responsible for the

elliptical narrative in *Sula*.

The novel is divided into two larger sections. The first part includes the years from 1919 to 1927, and the second from 1937 to 1965. In the opening section, the friendship between Sula and Nel, who both are 9 years old in the chapter “1919”, plays a central role. It reaches an end with the marriage of Nel and Jude. The second part starts with Sula’s return to Medallion after a 10-year absence. In the narrative, there are four gaps of time longer than just one year. The first is from 1923 to 1926 and is vaguely accounted for in other chapters. The second omission of time is between 1928 and 1936.

5.1. Narrative detachment in the characterisation of *Sula*.

This study claims that the narrator depicts Sula as a traumatized character, which is a condition that is confirmed by numerous commentators of the novel. There are some examples in the literature review of this essay, but also in other works, such as “Trauma and Place in Morrison’s *Sula*” by Shu-Lin Chen. Moreover, Vashti Crutcher Lewis’ analysis points out that one meaning of the African Babangi name Sula is “to be paralyzed of fear” (91). Sula’s traumatized state is also expressed directly through the narrating voice (see e.g. 118-119); but, specifically, through the way that the narration is structured (see the analysis below).

During her ten years away, we do not know much about what happens to Sula, because the narrative is scarce in information. However, the gap is retroactively, to some extent, being filled out by the narrating voice and by Sula’s thoughts, actions, and statements. Early, in a chapter called “1937”, the narrator suggests, through Sula’s new dress style, that she has undergone a transformation. She is now dressed like “a movie star” (90).

However, on her return to Medallion, Sula seems to have hardened and become more egoistic. She acts harshly towards Eva, her grandmother, and pushes her to admit that she

once had put her leg under a train so that she could receive the insurance money. (93). Sula also blames the old woman for the death of Plume (ibid). Eventually, Sula places Eva in a care home because she is “scared of her” (100). For some people in the community, Sula appears to be a woman of action and control on her return, but many also consider her to be brutally selfish. The women of the community fear and hate Sula due to her habit of sleeping with married men. She becomes the talk of the town and is treated like a “pariah” by the black community; though, she acts as if she does not really care (122).

When Nel asks her about the years away from Medallion and about the nightclubs in Nashville, Sula replies: “I was in college, Nellie. No nightclubs on campus” (99). The narrative treats Sula’s time in Nashville secretly, despite its significance in her apparent personal transformation. Later in the text, the narrating voice presents new facts about her college period, and we get to know that she has become bored of being in cities like “Nashville, Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon and San Diego” where she had earned money from various men through “the same language of love”(120). This new information, i.e., Morrison’s use of “the technique of suspension”, is presented by the narrator in medias res, seemingly incidentally, without any further reflection on it.

More information on this matter is presented in a quiet dramatic setting, when Nel catches Jude, her husband, and Sula having sex on the floor. We get to experience Nel’s feelings through the narrative voice, told in the first person: “I waited for Sula to look up at me at any minute and say one of those lovely college words like *aesthetic* or *rapport*” (105). Being presented in such a precarious situation, surely, this additional information is barely possible to take into consideration. The dramatic narrated sex scene grabs the reader’s full attention, and it is most likely that the reader misses the last few words of the sentence. Putting together all the scattered narrative pieces regarding this event, emerges a story, in which Sula seems to tell us a quite personal version of the truth.

Sula seems anxious to make a good impression on her return to Medallion, but despite this, she destroys her own reputation and her friendship with Nel. She becomes more and more isolated, and only three years after her graceful return to the Bottom, the then thirty-year-old Sula has become sick and isolated, a grieving woman who seems to be stuck in the past. Her rapid decline makes the reader wonder what really happened to her during her 10-year absence. However, the narrator hints that Sula did not have such a successful life during these years.

Reading the novel, one becomes curious about why Sula has changed: Did she experience something dramatic or traumatic during her absence? Or could it be that her traumatic past, described in Part one of the novel, has caught up with her in Part two? What made her destroy important parts of her life in such a short period of time?

Her decline in part two is evident. It seems plausible that she studied just for a short period of time, but then she probably stopped and started to earn money on sexual work. Though, it should be emphasized that several interpretations are possible. The narrative ellipsis makes the reader speculate about what happens during the time gap, and also about the narrative relation between past and present; in other words, the elliptical narrative makes the reader contemplate the relation between *l'histoire* and *le récit*. This effect is achieved thanks to the interplay between a fragmented narrative and the fictional depiction of traumatized characters.

The narrative outlines many traumatic events in the first part of the novel, i.e., in Sula's early years. The young girl, 10 to 13 years old, then watches her mother, Hannah, burn to death (73ff) and she is present when Eva, her grandmother, kills Plum (46ff). Sula also slashes "off only the tip of her finger" (54ff) with the purpose of saving her and Nel from a threatening situation. The most difficult event for Sula to overcome is, perhaps, when she (and Nel) throw Chicken Little in the water so that he dies (60ff). Twelve-year-old Sula is the one ultimately responsible for the event, and she is surely haunted by that memory (Stayton 71).

The narrating voice tells us that Sula lost her “feeling of responsibility” (118) after this incident. Sula’s speechlessness regarding this event, and the others, is, according to this study, a manifestation of traumatic memory, which is characterized by its “absence of verbal narrative” (Herman 38).

On her return to Medallion “Sula proves disruptive” (Peach 50). She displays an unconcerned and detached attitude towards her best friend’s feelings, is cold towards her grandmother’s needs and totally unbothered about what the rest of the community think about her. Her behaviour and actions could hardly be regarded as signs of independence or strength. Therefore, it seems surprising that several studies consider Sula to be a strong and independent character, a woman who independently chooses her own fate.

The study at hand argues that the narrative account of Sula’s (self-) destructive conduct, especially in Part 2, is a result of the traumatizing events that she experienced in Part one. It could be stated that Sula’s behaviour in Part 2 is detached due to what happened in Part 1, and that she, in the beginning of Part 2, struggles to endure her post-traumatic reactions. Stayton expresses a similar view, arguing that Sula, due to her traumatic experiences in an early age, becomes “detached from others, and unable to build healthy, meaningful relationships” and that she has “no feelings of empathy for or attachment to others” (71). Herman explains how so called constrictive trauma symptoms continue over a long time and can manifest themselves differently, and that they even can “be mistaken for enduring characteristics of the victim’s personality” (49). Sula might appear strong in the eyes of others, but her careless attitude and her “emotional detachment” are surely symptoms of previously experienced trauma (Stayton 72).

Another manifestation of her traumatized state is the fact that Sula has a promiscuous lifestyle and goes “to bed with men as frequently as she” can (122). The narrator explains that it “was the only place where she could find what she was looking for: misery and the ability

to feel deep sorrow” (ibid). The narrative also informs us that Sula is “As willing to feel pain, as to give pain” (118). Regarding Sula’s sexual relations with men, the risks are getting higher and higher; at first, she sleeps with men in general, then with married men, and finally with her best friend’s husband. Sula does this, despite the fact that Nel is her closest friend and is “the first person who” has “been real to her” (119-120). Despite their close friendship, Sula cannot understand why Nel is upset about her sexual affair with her husband. The narrator tells us that Sula “had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude” (119).

According to the current investigation, Sula’s contradictory behaviour is a trauma symptom. Herman contends that “Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately” (56). It is common that traumatized people – like Sula does with men – form “intense, unstable relationships”, often characterized by “injustice, and betrayal” (Herman 110). Through her sexual risk-taking, Sula is unconsciously struggling, trying to overcome her feeling of “alienation and inner deadness” (Herman 48), aiming to revive a part of herself that has died.

Sula’s speechlessness and unawareness regarding her troubled condition is a central theme of the novel. In the African Babangi culture her name can mean “to be afraid”, “to run away”, “to alter from a proper condition to a worse one”, “to be blighted” (Lewis 91). What is depicted in Morrison’s characterization, or rather ‘not’ or ‘vaguely depicted’, as speechless and detached has its formal counterpart in the narrative: “Morrison represents the speechless terror of trauma in recurring scenes (...) in which her characters experience violence from a detached perspective” (Bouson 3).

Genette suggests (*Narrative discourse* 106) that it is necessary to consider “the story time elided” if we strive to understand the meaning of an elliptical narrative. Coming to terms with Morrison’s novel, implies evaluating the “incompleteness” of it (Peach 22). These formal

prescriptions have been followed by the current investigation. We have seen examples where it is up to the reader to fill up the gaps and to cooperate in the creation of meaning. There are endless examples of this co-constructive process in *Sula*. However, this study is not a quantitative investigation. In a qualitative study, like the one at hand, it is more fruitful to conduct a deep analysis with just a few aspects and examples.

The author's narrative technique invites the reader to experience the states of mind of some of the characters. In the novel, the detached state of the trauma victims is characterized and reinforced by an elliptical and fragmented narrative. In Sula's case, it is as if she, seemingly unmoved, observes the action in a blur and from a distance. Her "emotional detachment" (Herman 43) is also expressed by the narrative. The narrative reinforces the distant impression by excluding emotional expressions and vital parts. One example of this 'narrative detachment' is when Sula, "detached physically, and mentally" (Stayton 72) watches the horrifying event when her mother, Hannah, is burning to death. Sula is never mentioned in the narrative until the event is over. Then, Eva, hospitalized, reflects on the episode, feeling "convinced that Sula passively had watched Hannah burn, not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (78). This retroactive information makes the reader reconsider his or her impression concerning the event. Morrison's refined story-telling creates an impression that Sula's observing attitude is similar to the one of a camera. The author's technique gives us a vague, or no, experience of Sula's reactions, because the narrative omits descriptions of her actions and states of mind. The narrator depicts a traumatic event, traumatically reinforced by the actions of Eva and Hannah; an episode in which Sula's absentminded and detached role functions as a link between the trauma event/symptom and the elliptical narrative. She observes the traumatic event from a detached, or even invisible, place, a circumstance that is accompanied by a detached and elliptical narrative.

Neither can we be sure that Eva's words about Sula are true. The elliptical narrative forces

the reader to consider all given information, which can be presented anywhere in the narrative. This uncertain condition makes the reader pose questions, both to the narrative and the narrator: Why was not Sula depicted in this event? What did Sula do? Why didn't she try to help the women? etc.

The same process is in progress during the event when Sula watches Eva burn Plum to death in 1921. The fact that Sula is present at this event becomes manifest in the narrative first in 1937, when Sula tells Nel that: "It's true. I saw it" (101). A similar 'detached effect' is achieved in this example. We can suddenly add on Sula into a previous narrated event, from which we previously thought she was excluded. In the updated version of the event, Sula also acts like "a camera", observing from a detached place, depicted by a detached and omissive narrative. This makes the reader reevaluate the event, adding material and information to the story and the narrative, a process that is similar to real trauma: The narrative pops up gradually, mimicking the pattern that trauma memories tend to follow. Morrison's "technique of suspension" (Page 33) is one example of the fragmented narrative. We can also see that past and present play a significant role in the analysis of the event. The past forms the present, but new information from the past provides a new perspective of the narrative present. The updated interpretation also adds new material to the story. In this case, Sula's passive and detached attitude conveys information. The fragmented narrative combined with the depiction of a detached Sula is effectful: It makes the reader perceive some of the feelings that the author wants us to feel, and it is the interplay between form and content that offers this reading instruction.

The narrative never reveals why Sula's grandmother, Eva, lost her leg. We know that Eva, in 1921, left her children in the care of her neighbour, Mrs Suggs (34) and that it was meant to be for one day. But Eva returns after eighteen months one-legged. The narrative omits all explanations regarding the traumatic incident. The reader does not get to know what happened

until many years after the original event occurred. But even then, the information is too scarce to give the reader a complete understanding of the event. Due to this narrative technique, the reader often remains uncertain, and obtains the updated version of the narrative simultaneously with the characters. This is why a reader of Morrison's work get a close relation with the narrated world: The formal fragmentation generates a feeling of closeness to the narration and to the characters; it makes us feel that we are standing in the middle of events, co-acting and even co-narrating.

5.2. Narrative dissociation in the characterisation of Shadrack

Morrison's portrayal – especially in the beginning of the novel – of Shadrack, a young black man, is a clear example of the trauma narrative. The depiction of Shadrack includes some features of the trauma novel, such as Balaev (159) describes them: “a nonlinear plot” with “disruptive temporal sequences” with the purpose of emphasizing “mental confusion, chaos”. The narrative also replicates the traumatic condition through “flashbacks” (Bouson 7), “Dissociation” (ibid) and “polyvocalism” (Page 31).

It is not randomly that Shadrack is the first character that Morrison depicts in the novel. Initially, the author sets a dark traumatized tone, both via her presentation of Bottom and of Shadrack. He is a twenty-two-year-old First World War veteran. During a battle in France, he was involved in a traumatic event, where he “saw the face of a soldier near him fly off” (8). Shadrack is heavily traumatized (Bouson 51, Stayton 52), terrified and totally disorientated, and he does not “even know who or what he” is (12). The “basic structures of the [his] self” are clearly damaged (Herman 51). He carries so much psychological pain that he hallucinates and believes that his hands suddenly are growing in “higgledy-piggledy fashion” (9). Shadrack has many of the post-traumatic symptoms that Herman describes above. He does not feel safe in his own body and is struggling hard to piece “himself together” (Stayton 27).

When Shadrack is put in a straitjacket, he calms himself down by the sentence: “Someone was speaking softly just outside the door (10). This sentence appears in a different version later in the narrative: “and his soft voices just outside the door” (p.14). Traumatized people often retain “a fixed idea” (Herman 37), and they “often feel impelled to re-create the moment of terror” *ibid* (39). The narrative’s fragmented depiction of Shadrack’s fragmented thoughts and feelings – which in this example, are reenactments of the past trauma – make us speculate about the story: Where did that sentence originally come from? In this case, the elliptical function is being used in order to embody the traumatic memory, and when these gaps (or question marks) occur in the narrative, they give us a hint about what could have happened in the story. This is, regarding to the formulation of meaning in the novel, an obvious co-operation between *l’histoire* and *le récit* and between form and content.

In *Sula*, we can see how Morrison formalizes her writing in accord with the trauma narrative. The depiction of when Shadrack is walking away from the hospital (10-11) is narrated in accordance to the trauma narrative and is told in a dissociative manner. This part of the novel has a “floating” narrative voice, which moves between the narrator’s perspective and Shadrack’s own traumatic condition, between a first-person and a third-person narration. This kind of story-telling is called “focalized narrative” by Genette, “told by a narrator who is not one of the characters but who adopts the point of view of one” (*Narrative discourse* 168). Moreover, this is an example of what Page describes “as Morrison’s polyvocalism” (31), a narrative technique which also enforces the feeling of limitlessness and confusion, which are well-known trauma symptoms (Herman 37). The narrator is describing Shadrack from the outside, but there is also a clear sense that we can take part of Shadrack’s own disordered experiences of anxiety and fear during his walk. He is either perceiving things in a twisted, highly personal way, or even hallucinating: “They [people] were thin slips, like paper dolls floating down the walks. Some were seated in chairs with wheels, propelled by other paper

figures from behind. All seemed to be smoking, and their arms and legs curved in the breeze. A good high wind would pull them up and away and they would land perhaps among the tops of the trees” (11). This passage is followed by a neutral, more balanced third-person narrative voice: “Once on the road, he headed west. The long stay in the hospital had made him weak – too weak to walk steadily on the gravel shoulders of the road” (11-12). The narrative fluctuates between an external narrator and an internal (Genette’s *Narrative discourse* 189ff). It does not become completely internal, but we can perceive Shadrack’s chaotic condition through the different moods of the narrative.

In the beginning of the novel, the narration of Shadrack’s situation after the First World War is related in dissociative way. Morrison chooses to narrate only small, disconnected pieces of the event, presenting images, rather than words. Shadrack is detached from the narrative present, and he does not share the same point of view as the narrator. In this part of the novel, the form of the narrative imitates the trauma condition. It aims to present images, rather than words, addressing the fact that “Traumatic memories lack verbal narrative; rather they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman 38).

In the examples given, we can see how the interplay between form and content works in the *Sula*. If Shadrack’s walk would have been narrated from a neutral perspective, by an external and fixed narrator, the event would have lost much of its traumatic effect.

The narrative about Shadrack is elliptical and jumps in time without accounting for what happened during the periods that are omitted. The narrative begins depicting Shadrack at a battlefield during The First World War. Suddenly, when Shadrack opens up his eyes (8), he is hospitalized. His time in the hospital is told quickly, also fluctuating between an external and internal perspective. Then suddenly, the narrator tells of when Shadrack is leaving the hospital. We get to know that that the hospital has been his haven for “more than a year” (11). These quick narrative movements between three different events create an almost visual

sensation, similar to that of a tracking shot in a movie. The gaps of the narrative, also accompany, Shadrack's traumatized condition; when he falls unconscious on the battlefield, the narrative stops; when he opens his eyes at the hospital, the narrative starts, etc. In *Sula*, the interaction between form and content reinforces the traumatized condition of the events and characters described. This is achieved through an interplay between an elliptical narrative and the 'cracked' characterization.

5.3. African tradition and the transgenerational phantom

Vashti Crutcher Lewis argues that, as a novel, *Sula* "is too complex to be classified" (91). She affirms that this is due to that "Morrison writes from an African point of view" (ibid). The present investigation claims that the narrative depiction of Sula as a character is complex to that degree that it is impossible to draw any certain conclusions about her. This is an important outcome of the analysis above. The main reason of this circumstance is that the narrator never points out clear causes for a certain event or behaviour, and therefore, does not leave the readers certain about what happens or happened in the narrative. Consequently, a lot of the explanations are simmering underneath the narrative and are never narrated. Moreover, most of them are located in the realm of past. Easily established causality is in short supply in Morrison's fiction. Interpreting her literature, it helps to be aware of and to appreciate this condition.

Another cause of the novel's complexity is the transgenerational process, which also affects the characterization. Torok and Abrahams (165ff) contends that an experienced trauma works like a 'phantom' in the victim's psyche. If not treated in therapy, the phantom will be passed over from the trauma victim to the next generation. 'Phantom' is a metaphor for a scientific process, though it refers to conditions whose explanatory frameworks belong to past events and to people that often are already dead.

Corey Stayton writes about intergenerational trauma in *Sula* and that it moves on from “generation to generation” and culminates in the women living in the Bottom (62). She concludes that both Nel and Sula are victims for the transgenerational phantom. In the White family, Nel’s grandmother was a “whore” (17) and, according to Stayton, that affected both her daughter, Hannah (Nel’s mother) and her granddaughter. Stayton argues that Nel has “traumatic experiences transferred” from her mother (65). In the Peace family, Sula’s grandmother, Eva is surrounded by trauma events. Some examples of this are when she is abandoned by her womanizing husband, when sacrifices a leg just to get the insurance money, when she kills her heroin addicted son and watches her daughter burn to death. Sula’s mother, Hannah, has also experienced a lot of pain. The narrative tells that she suddenly loses her father, and also her husband, Rekus. When the latter dies, Hannah becomes promiscuous and “reacts to trauma by connecting with men sexually for the feeling of being attached” (Stayton 70). As we have seen earlier, Sula reacts to the intergenerational trauma in a similar way as her mother. Stayton suggests that Sula feels abandoned by her mother and that it also “leaves her detached from others, and unable to build healthy, meaningful relationships” (71).

The notion that the already dead people or ancestors affect subsequent generations is also strong in Lewis’ study about the novel. She considers *Sula* as “Morrison’s most complex work in reference to traditional African culture” (91). Lewis argues that both Sula and Shadrack stand in a spiritual contact with their ancestors, and that they, in an interpretation that has its roots in the African culture, would have been regarded in a positive way and not seen as “pariahs of their community” (92). Some of these extra-narrative references are, perhaps, hard to perceive. On the other hand, they offer an alternative interpretation of *Sula*, which contributes to a more positive reading, that does not refer to trauma.

A common point of contact can be established through a fusion of Lewis’ reading of the novel and an interpretation that builds on the transgenerational notion. Both are interpretations

that have their origin in the realm of previous generations and in the realm of the dead.

As we have seen, Abraham and Torok mean that the phantom movement implies that a certain traumatic experience can pass through generations, from one person's unconscious over to next. In this respect, a key event in the novel is when Sula swings Chicken Little into the lake where he dies. In a framework that is based on traumatic interpretation, it could be argued that the narrator tells us nothing about Sula's reactions regarding this episode.

Admittedly, in one sentence, we get to know that "she collapsed in tears" (63). Over time, this trauma memory makes Sula speechless, a mute condition that is reflected by a speechless narrative. What is not expressed, remains, and the remainder becomes manifest through the phantom.

The transgenerational theme is visible in the traumatic incident that occurred one year before Chicken Little dies, when Sula was 11 years old and watches her mother kill her son, Plum. The speechlessness of Eva, Hannah and Sula regarding this event is evident; no feelings are depicted, only accusations.

As a way of understanding Lewis more positive approach regarding Shadrack and Sula, we need to examine the events that are taking place around and after Chicken Little's death (61 ff). When Chicken Little drowns, Shadrack lives "on the opposite shore" (ibid) and is watching the traumatic event. Nel discovers him and Sula runs over a bridge to confront Shadrack. She walks into his cottage and asks him if he has seen what just has happened. Shadrack looks happy and nods "his head as though answering a question", and he says the quite dubious "Always" (62). Sula leaves Shadrack running and she drops her waist belt (156).

Lewis argues that, in *Sula*, a part of the African culture is "woven into Black-American culture" (...) "with such extraordinary subtlety that neither the characters nor the reader are aware of it" (91). Referring to Morrison's essay "Rootedness", Lewis explains that

Morrison's novels are rooted in the past because the fact that an ancestor is always present in some way (91). Further, Lewis contends that in West African culture, Shadrack would be considered as divine, with his "specialness and spirituality" (92), partly because he had entered the ancestral spiritual world, after being unconscious during the war.

Lewis assures that both Sula and Shadrack "would be more at home" (ibid) and treated with respect in the African society to which she is referring. She considers Shadrack to be a water spirit, and argues that Sula's birthmark, that looks like a rose or a serpent (156, 74), links her to Shadrack. When the narrator tells us Shadrack's version, in 1941, of his encounter with Sula twenty years earlier, Shadrack reflects on the fact that Sula has "a tadpole over her eye", and because of that Shadrack sees her as a friend (156).

Morrison's blending of the African American culture with the African aesthetic suggests a way out of some of the misery that a trauma-oriented reading can imply. It is also a hint to the interpreter that the narrative meaning in *Sula* is dependent on the reader's point of view.

6. Conclusion

Toni Morrison employs both the narrative content and form with the purpose of creating a powerful and realistic narrative. As we have seen, in *Sula*, these two narrative manifestations co-operate in the creation of meaning. In the novel, one of Morrison's aims is surely to represent the hardships that some of the characters experience. In her fiction, both the narrative and the characters are "traumatized". She leaves gaps in the narrative and depicts "cracked" characters, thereby offering the readers to take an active part in the making of the story.

Morrison's story-telling has one of its sources in the slave narrative. In *Sula*, the narrative, le récit, originates from real stories. Her fictitious and authentic narratives, are based on real stories, and they could maybe be considered to function as real 'les histoires'; even though,

they always are rewritten in the author's personal way.

In *Sula*, Morrison's narrative suggests, at least, two different readings: one more traditional African American reading of the novel, that is set in a framework that interprets Sula and Shadrack as characters affected by trauma. Though, in this study, the analysis of *Sula* exemplifies how open an interpretation of Morrison's story-telling can be. A reader of the novel can never be totally sure of what the narrator wants him or her to see.

The second, African-influenced reading of *Sula*, offers an alternative interpretation where Sula and Shadrack are described in a more positive way. In this context, the narrative provides an answer to some of the unanswered questions regarding Sula and Shadrack. This could maybe be regarded as esoteric, but it can also be a proof of the fact that Morrison expects nothing less than everything from her readers.

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Afterword

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