

“I Didn’t Even Know His Name”:  
Names and Naming in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

When the heroine of Toni Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*<sup>1</sup> learns that she knew a lover only by his nickname, Ajax, and not by his real name, Albert Jacks, she muses:

“I didn’t even know his name. And if I didn’t know his name, then there is nothing I did know and I have known nothing ever at all. . . . How could he help but leave me since he was making love to a woman who didn’t even know his name.” (p. 117)

This passage underscores central concerns of this novel, an ironic tale of Black adolescent maturation and the growth of self-knowledge. Throughout the book, the uncertainties of human motivation and mysteries of human identity impeded understanding, thus leading to loss and betrayal. As epitomized by Sula’s speech, names and naming function significantly in the development of this theme.

Many of the characters’ names, like that of Ajax, conjure up heroes of literary tradition. Because, in most instances, the contemporary characters are pointedly of lesser stature than their literary predecessors, these allusions provide an ironic indication of a fall from past greatness.

To the primitive mind, knowing the names of, or giving names to, others is a means of exerting power and control over them. This power has ironic ramifications in *Sula*, for the naming process often has unexpected, even dangerous consequences. And frequently, as in the case of Sula and Ajax, characters do not really “know the names” or essences of others and therefore fail to understand or to establish connections with them.

In the novel, characters’ names always link them ironically to a larger literary context. Odette C. Martin has shown how, by her use of names, Morrison satirizes major works of Black American literature.<sup>2</sup> Martin’s demonstration does not exhaust the implications of these names, however; we may fruitfully explore the classical Greek and Biblical allusions which they evoke.

But first we shall consider Morrison’s ironic account of the naming of the Black neighborhood in which the story takes place. Epic narratives place emphasis on names and naming. Using this convention ironically, *Sula*’s first chapter retells the eponymous anecdote, termed a “nigger joke,” explaining how the community came to be called the Bottom. A master once gave a slave freedom, but, instead of the promised agriculturally superior bottom, or valley, land, gave him a piece of sloping hillside. The white man justified the substitution by telling the slave that the hill is closer to God, and “the bottom of heaven” (p. 5). The master’s naming is a self-serving assertion of power. Through the pun, Morrison indicates the social position of the Black community, and sets the stage for her novel of thwarted expectations. As in the case of the “bottom,” names throughout the book obfuscate rather than reveal reality.

In her use of women’s names, Morrison questions the concepts of womanhood and mother-

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<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York, 1973; rpt. New York: Bantam, 1975). All further references to this work appear in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Odette C. Martin, “*Sula*,” in *First World*, Winter 1977, 35–44.

hood which obtain in our society. Drawn from the opposing Hebraic and Hellenistic traditions, the names in *Sula* recall mythic women who are either noted for their virtue and devotion to family or notorious for their flagrant disregard of honor and family obligations. Within the Western cultural tradition, then, Morrison implies, there are two paths for women, that of conventional, dutiful self-sacrifice to family or that of the adventurous temptress. But, because the characters in *Sula* are complex beings who bear ironic relationships to their literary antecedents, the novel suggests the limitations inherent in the two roles.

Women in this novel belong to two Black matriarchal dynasties. The founder of one of these is named Rochelle, a derivative of the Hebrew Rachel. One of the four matriarchs of the Old Testament, Rachel is portrayed in the book of *Jeremiah* and in legend as weeping over the fate of her children, the Hebrew people. But Morrison's Rochelle is an elegant mulatto prostitute who gives up her daughter, Helene.

In naming her daughter Helene, Rochelle aligns herself with a pagan, romantic world opposed to the Biblical Judaic one. Helene, from the Greek "light," is a variant of the name of the beautiful, seductive Helen of Troy whose abduction led to the Trojan War. But the Helene of the novel abdicates the possibilities of romance and glamor inherent in her name. Determined to escape all connection with her disreputable mother, she marries Wiley Wright (whose surname is the Anglo-Saxon "worker, craftsman") and becomes "right" in the sense of respectable, a pillar of the church and an arbiter of social standards. Scaling down her expectations, she is concerned with propriety; her battles are on the petty questions of etiquette. Even her name is diminished; the neighbors persist in calling her Helen. If Helen's fate is an ironic diminution of the beautiful Greek queen, her daughter Nel represents an even narrower contraction. Choosing the conventional path of marriage and motherhood, Nel contrives a constricted living space for herself. Her marriage to Jude Green is described in images of traps and spider webs.

Diametrically opposite to the Wright's sanitary household and Helene's attenuated sexuality is Sula's family, the book's other matriarchy, the tribal domain of Eva Peace. Eva, whose name suggests the original Biblical progenitor, presides over a chaotic extended family. In her Morrison ironically explores the role of the Black mother trapped in a culture of poverty, and social stigmatization.

Eva bears three children, adopts others, takes on an assortment of roomers and boarders—especially newlyweds—and builds an ever-growing house to contain the expanding tribe. For Eva, motherhood is a matter of survival. Because of her desperate poverty after her husband's desertion, she has no leisure for tenderness or playing, for any expressions of love. In order to provide for her children, she sacrifices her leg in a contrived train accident so as to collect insurance money.

Eva takes on an important task which the Biblical Adam performed, that of giving names. However, these labels hinder rather than promote the development of the people she names. The nicknames she gives to neighbors and to her real and adopted children become the ones they are known by. When she calls each of three very different adopted children Dewey the similar names creates an identical fate for all of them. Martin points out, "adult failure to acknowledge their individual identities causes selfishness."<sup>3</sup> Further, this indifference to "individual identity" obliterates that identity. Although they are markedly different in physical appearance and age when they arrive, they soon become indistinguishable and their growth is stunted: they each grow to be only four feet tall.

Eva is thus an ironic version of the Hebrew mother. Her daughter Hannah, on the other hand, is a pagan earth-goddess. Associated with images of the natural world and fertility, Hannah runs Eva's house and seduces the husbands of friends, neighbors and boarders.

In contrast, the Biblical Hannah (*Samuel* 1, 1–2) was a pious but barren, wife, granted her prayer for a child that she vowed to dedicate to the service of God. Morrison's Hannah is almost

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<sup>3</sup>Martin, 40.

indifferent to her daughter, Sula. While the Biblical Hannah's son, Samuel, grew up to be a prophet, the townspeople consider the independent, isolated Sula evil and shun her.

Sula's name is, I believe, a new coinage, making it unique in the book, as Sula herself is unique. By using the heroine's given name alone as a title, Morrison stresses both her stature and the book's mythic quality, for only a heroic figure needs no surname for identification. Alone of all the women in the Bottom, Sula refuses to be identified by her relationship to a man. Rejecting marriage, she becomes an outcast in the eyes of her community. In her independent, adventurous spirit, her avoidance of commitment to ties, she behaves like a man, and, as Morrison says of her:

that quality of masculinity—and I mean this in the pure sense—in a woman at her time is outrage, total outrage. She can't get away with that.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Sula, because she tries to flout convention, to escape the limitations of women's rigidly defined roles, to carve out her own destiny and to explore and develop herself, becomes a pariah. The book's other women, accepting society's limits, move within narrower bounds. Their names are ironic indicators of their descent from larger legendary figures.

Men, too, in this novel are seen ironically in relationship to their literary ancestors. Ajax, of course (the nickname of Sula's lover), was originally a hero of the Trojan War, "second only to Achilles in bravery and strength."<sup>5</sup> The contemporary Albert Jacks, however, is in a far different position. A Black male in a white society, he discovers his prospects for heroism and greatness—or, indeed, for any worthwhile activity—curtailed by the inflexible prejudice of the white world. Denied meaningful work, allowed only to dream of, never to fly, his beloved airplanes, he vents his wrath against the police mistreatment of a Black man arrested for drunkenness. While the wrath of the Greek hero Ajax led to his death, the outcome facing A. Jacks is arrest and trial. But, instead, he flees town to escape Sula's developing love and possessiveness, and to attend the air show in Dayton.

The Biblical male names in the novel carry similarly ironic relationships to their originals. Jude Green, the man who marries Nel, is, like the Biblical Judas, the betrayer of those who love and trust him. By his affair with Sula and his desertion of his wife he subverts Nel's youth and innocence, her "greenness."

The name of Eva's spouse demonstrates his immaturity and unworthiness. While the Biblical Eve's partner was called Adam, which means "man," Eva's husband is only "BoyBoy."

Another important character in the book is Shadrack, a shadowy figure whose silent witnessings frame the novel and mark cruxes of the plot. His name links him with the Hebrew captive who was thrown into a fiery furnace and saved unsinged because of his faith in God (*Daniel* 1–3). Shadrack's fiery furnace is the World War I battle in which he witnesses a fellow soldier decapitated by gunfire. Although Shadrack lives to return to the bottom, he is only the shell of a man, living in solitude in constant dread of death. Shadrack, like Sula, is an isolated figure, without family or social ties, and therefore believed by the townsfolk to be evil.

Even more significant in the novel than the ironic dimensions of these names are the tragic failures of human connection which are symbolized by the inability to comprehend the mysteries of identity, to "know the names" of others. Every relationship in the book is marred by misunderstanding, unfulfilled expectations, inadequate communication: marriages, love affairs, parent/child relationships all flounder on these treacherous shoals. Hannah and Eva differ on the meaning and need for love; Hannah's indifference to Sula undermines Sula's selfhood; often external pressures rather than genuine affection prompt mothers to care for their children or children to care for aged parents.

As we have noted, Sula believes she lost Ajax because she "didn't know his name." A greater loss, however, is Sula's loss of intimacy with Nel, the closest relationship she ever had. Her

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<sup>4</sup>Interview with Toni Morrison by Robert B. Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place," *Massachusetts Review*, 18 (1977), 487.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph Kaster, *Putnam's Concise Mythological Dictionary* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 9.

friendship with Nel is long-standing, growing from their childhood, their first perceptions of their own emerging selfhood. Remembering the origins of this friendship, Sula recalls that:

Nel was the first person who had been real to her, *whose name she knew*. (p. 103, emphasis mine)

Knowing another's name, for Sula, is an indication of spiritual kinship. Nel is the only person with whom she shares this intuitive harmony. But her friendship with Nel is shattered when she commits adultery with Nel's husband Jude.

Saddened and dismayed by this separation, Sula learns that:

she had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. (p. 104)

Yet the primacy of their friendship remains for both women; no other relationship can ever replace it. At her death, Sula is thinking of sharing her newest experience with Nel. And, for Nel, many years later comes the realization that Sula had been the most important person in her life. The book closes with her lamentation at Sula's grave. Nel's futile cries of "Sula" drive home the novel's message of the inadequacy of names to capture the essence of another's reality.

All the characters in the novel, locked into their own worlds of self, lack the power to enter fully into others' lives, and so remain thwarted in their hopes for communion, their attempts to develop deep human connectedness. This irremediable loneliness is summed up in Sula's plaint, "I didn't even know his name."