

# Sites of Laughter, Sites of Pain: *Sula* in Modern Memory

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**O**bscene. That's how Toni Morrison depicts the most memorable World War I veteran in her *oeuvre*. Loud. Vulgar. Hilarious. Mad. The picture Morrison paints of Shadrack in her 1973 novel *Sula* contrasts with the images burned into the memory of the Great War. Take Paul Fussell's influential 1975 publication *The Great War and Modern Memory*. The cover art depicts a black and white image of a filthy and pensive child-combatant whose head is tilted down and whose eyes stare infinitely to some unknown point in the distance. His disheveled uniform hangs loosely around his emaciated body. The youth and innocence so apparent in the boy's appearance is emotionally, if not physically, gone. Jay Winter's response to Fussell, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (1995), contains equally somber, brooding cover art. The picture displays a snow-covered graveyard, with each site marked by two pieces of wood configured perpendicularly in the shape of a Christian cross. The sites are unmarked and irregular. One anonymous soldier, whose face is deliberately shrouded in darkness, leans on a rifle amidst this massive display of death. Both *The Great War and Modern Memory* and *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* demand reverence. They demand silence to recognize the colossal suffering endured in the cataclysmic event known as "The Great War."

Shadrack defies such reverence. He gallops across the central town in *Sula*, the Bottom, with his genitals unburdened by the confines of his trousers, wearing a hangman's noose around his neck, and ringing a cowbell while inviting the people of the town to kill themselves or anyone else in his ritualized, annual National Suicide Day. If the "1000-yard stare" of Fussell's

combatant is thought-provoking, Shadrack's stare is perverse. If Winter's cover welcomes mourning and reverence, Shadrack invites a marauding rage.

These images—Morrison's, Fussell's, and Winter's—all allude to different interpretations of the Great War's relationship with modernity, or modern experience. Scholars of modernism—the period of artistic innovation between around 1890 and the Second World War—have long emphasized the drastic effects the Great War had over modern expressions of experience and understanding. Fussell's claim is that the Great War was, for combatants, an essentially ironic experience. Violence shattered the expectations and sensibilities of the bourgeois Edwardian and Georgian societies that dominated European culture before the war. Samuel Hynes writes that the Great War "brought to an end the life and values of Victorian and Edwardian England" and that the conflict "changed reality" which in turn changed the artistic expressions of that reality (xi). The Great War was "more ironic than any before or since" (Fussell 8) because the reality that combatants faced so drastically differed from the expectations of the society from which they came. Fussell echoes the sentiments of Ernest Hemingway, writing 46 years earlier in *A Farewell to Arms*, that "abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene" (178) after one had experienced the war. Indeed, many combatant-authors wrote similar sentiments in "the literature of disenchantment," which Modris Eksteins describes as "the emerging sense of irony, disillusionment, and alienation among front soldiers" (175) after their experience on the front. Authors who now emblemize the war and its memory, like Hemingway, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Erich Maria Remarque detail the insurmountable distance, physically and emotionally, between the combatant and their homes. Alienation from both past and present sensibilities, according to this line of thinking, violently

birthed the era and aesthetic of “modernism,” described by Astradur Eysteinnsson as “the rage against prevalent traditions” (8).

While dominant, the “disenchanted” view of the war and its effects on modern understanding have not gone unchallenged. Ian Andrew Isherwood asserts in *Remembering the Great War* that both cynical and traditionally patriotic books were published in the decades after WWI, sharing space on the list of best-sellers, pointing to the multiplicity of Great War interpretations, rather than the dominance of one (46). Jay Winter challenges Fussell’s assertions in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, positing that “the enduring appeal of many traditional motifs—defined as an eclectic set of classical, romantic, or religious images and ideas—is directly related to the universality of bereavement in the Europe of the Great War and its aftermath” (5). Focusing on bereavement and mourning among the European population during and after the war, Winter claims that “‘seeing’ the war meant more a return to older patterns and themes than the creation of new ones” (7). Winter’s argument suggests that considering the Great War as a clear break from previous history vastly oversimplifies the communal grieving that took place across Europe during and after the war. Entrenched and dichotomous, scholarship on the Great War and modernism has largely followed these two distinct schools of thought.

That Toni Morrison enters this debate in *Sula* has yielded little notice among scholars of the novel. After all, *Sula* is not a “war book.” The novel describes the ever-changing relationship between two women, Nel and Sula, in a poor Black town in rural Ohio called the Bottom. As children, Nel and Sula are inseparable, often acting as one person until the untimely and accidental death of a child, Chicken Little, at the inadvertent hands of Sula. As they grow into adults, Nel follows the strict social code and sensibilities inherited from her family while Sula

breaks from those norms to establish a new morality. Sula, because of her promiscuity and inability to conform to the town, is cast as a pariah. She functions as a town scapegoat, embodying all the evil from which the town wishes to absolve themselves. Ultimately, the two women become estranged and their relationship shatters under the weight of their differing moral codes. Sula dies young from a sickness while Nel becomes an embodiment of her mother's values. It is only when Sula dies that Nel realizes the value of their friendships and acknowledges the extent of her affection toward her friend.

Scholarship of *Sula* has rightly focused on the novel's most central themes: morality, sisterhood, friendship, and community. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi highlights the ironic morality of the novel, emphasizing how Sula becomes an embodiment of "goodness" through her subversive action while Nel, "who is assumed to be to be the heroine, is a villainess, the one that the town should have been wary of" (131-132). Much has been made of Morrison's use of place, specifically the Bottom. In an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison claims that she "was interested in making the town, the community, the neighborhood, as strong a character as I could" (Baker 86). Morrison's exceptional narrative techniques, notably her presentation of time, have led scholars to underline her unorthodox temporality as "a non-linear historicity, a cosmology of time and repetition that itself finds reflection in the structure of her aesthetic" (Baillie 1) as opposed to a "traditional," linear narrative reflective of western orthodoxy.

Yet, Shadrack, and more specifically the Great War, have had only a marginal place in this scholarship. Important contributions have been made: Maureen Reddy reads *Sula* as an anti-war novel (30), and Trevor Dodman analyses Shadrack's portrayal as a shell shock narrative, but the novel's depiction of the WWI veteran returning from the battlefield to a modern understanding

of the war remains unexamined because ideas of whiteness and masculinity often populate the genre of the war novel to the exclusion of divergent perspectives and experiences.

Reading *Sula* as a post-WWI narrative allows us to understand how Shadrack subverts inherited perspectives on the Great War. Instead of subtly ironizing and emphasizing the inadequacy of traditional paradigms of expression and understanding, Shadrack maddens ideas of homecoming, commemoration, and mourning in what the narrator calls “A joke. A nigger joke” that might cause an observer to “hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain” imbedded within it (4). Morrison breaks with the interpretations of Fussell and Winter to portray an understanding of the war that emphasizes the hypocrisy and violence that Black veterans encountered upon their return to the United States. Whereas Fussell and Winter demand reverence, silence, and commemoration, Morrison demands iconoclastic madness, anger, and comedy, all of which blend into the subconscious of the Bottom. Ironically, Shadrack’s madness and National Suicide Day function as an expression of communal mourning; with it the Bottom can feel anger, pain, laughter, and consolation at the same time.

To understand Morrison’s innovation, I first analyze the tradition she subverts in *Sula*. As Justine Baillie remarks, “Morrison’s Aesthetic must be understood in relation to the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which it, and the traditions upon which she draws, have been created and developed” (1). Baillie emphasizes literary traditions because “Morrison must necessarily engage not only with a Black literary tradition, but also create her fictions in dialogue with the western narrative canon” to reconstruct history and expose “the oppressive power of a dominant language and ideology” (4). In the following sections, I examine the “disenchanted” memory of the Great War and Jay Winter’s response to it to demonstrate Morrison’s engagement with and deviation from inherited perspectives of The Great War experience.

Ultimately, we will see that Shadrack employs the irony so associated with the Great War's as a means of consolation and mourning, creating a space in which laughter and pain exist simultaneously.

### **The Inherited Memory of The Great War**

To understand "modern memory" and the tragic irony associated with it, one must first recognize the cultural pervasiveness of shell shock and its link with unseen psychological damage. English physician, psychologist, and anthropologist C.S. Myers first used the term "shell shock" in a 1915 medical journal<sup>1</sup> to characterize the mental debilitation that results from artillery fire bombardment. He describes three patients who experienced shell shock. The first, a twenty-year-old private, claimed that he was "'enjoying'" the soldiering of the war and "in the best of spirits" until "shells burst about him" (316). Myers continues the soldier's narrative:

He was now retiring over open ground, kneeling on both knees and trying to creep under wire entanglements, when two or three shells burst near him. As he was struggling to disentangle himself from the wire three more shells burst behind and one in front of him. (316)

The narrative trajectory of this soldier's account is violently ironic. That this soldier was "enjoying" the front conjures bucolic images celebrated in the English pastoral tradition and the introduction of steel shells acts as supreme example of the anti-pastoral. The second patient was a 25-year-old corporal who claimed that he was "buried for 18 hours" because an artillery shell collapsed the trench in which he lay (317). The third, a 23-year-old private, states that he was "blown off a heap of bricks 15 feet high" because artillery

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<sup>1</sup> Myers was likely the first to use "shell shock" in a medical journal, though he suggests the term was already in use among English soldiers before his publication (Winter, "Shell Shock", 315).

shells burst around him (319). The death surrounding these three men was so ubiquitous that witnesses claimed their survival was “a miracle.” That any life could escape such from such a nexus of death defied the grave odds of an unprecedented existence at the front.

These harrowing experiences of artillery fire were not new to the First World War, but they were experienced on an exceptional level. For reference, Napoleon brought with him about 100 tons of artillery shells to Waterloo in 1815 (Keegan 239). During the Battle of the Somme in 1916, British gunners brought 21,000 tons of artillery and fired approximately 1,500,000 shells (238). Napoleon’s gunners shot solid cannon balls at masses of enemy troops. Of the 1,500,000 rounds that the British fired at the Germans at the Somme, one million were shrapnel shells, indiscriminately spraying shards of metal through the air once the projectile hit the ground (237-238). Though the industrialization of artillery created an unprecedented level of fear and chaos, artillery was often-times less effective at killing than its modern counterpart: the machinegun. An invention of the United States, the Germans utilized machine guns at the Battle of the Somme from hidden and entrenched positions. These positions allowed the Germans to wait out the British artillery bombardment, resurfacing from their positions largely intact. Once their bombardment was complete, British troops had to cross up to 500 yards of “no-man’s land” to reach the German first line (Keegan 247). Many of the Entente forces were annihilated within seconds of leaving their trenches, cut down by well-placed German machinegun fire. One sergeant of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tyneside Irish recounts:

I could see, away to my left and right, long lines of men. Then I heard the “patter, patter” of machine-guns in the distance. By the time I’d gone another ten yards there seemed to be only a few men left around me; by the time I had gone twenty yards, I seemed to be on my own. Then I was hit myself. (Keegan 249)

These testimonials indicate that the volume and witness of violence increased on an unparalleled scale. Yet the mental debilitation that resulted from witnessing such violence was a hotly contested debate among military, political, and medical professionals. To many, psychological harm without physical injury was simply inconceivable. Jay Winter explains in his essay "Shell Shock" that "neurologists were prone to skepticism" about shell shock victims, believing such soldiers "were malingerers and pretending to be disabled." Most physicians and serving officers "believed that the entire category of psychogenic disability was a cover for fraud" and the only explanation for shell shock was "was cowardice or dissimulation" (310). By virtue of their psychological harm and subsequent mental debilitation, these veterans were deemed unmanly and weak.

As Trevor Dodman points out in *Shell Shock, Memory, and the Novel*, the imagery of the shell shock victim is inextricably linked to the post-war trope of disillusion. Dodman writes that "the covers of Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* and Denis Winter's *Death's Men* present us with able-bodied but hollowed-out and haunted looking soldiers who evoke the internal distress and fragmentation of shell shock" (10). Many of the most canonized literary depictions of the war create similar imagery. Erich Maria Remarque's protagonist in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Paul Bäumer, spends most of the war with an able body but endures insufferable psychological harm through his proximity to violence. When Paul returns home on leave, he stands in his old bedroom, excited to read the many books he had from his childhood: "I take one of the books, intending to read, and turn over the leaves. But I put it away and take out another." Paul finds it increasingly difficult to read the books of his childhood. Finally:

I stand there dumb. As before a judge.

Dejected.

Words, Words, Words – they do not reach me.

Slowly I place the books back in the shelves.

Nevermore.

Quietly, I go out of the room. (173)

Paul's inability to read indicates a mental paralysis on at least two levels. First, Paul's mental injuries from the war result in his inability to concentrate: "images float through my mind, but they do not grip me, they are mere shadows and memories" (172). His wartime injuries, whether physical or psychological, result in his mental degradation. Paul eventually understands that he can neither feel nor concentrate on any of the pleasures he once enjoyed at home. Yet Paul's inability to read the books also represents an unambiguous break from his childhood education and the ideals and virtues which led him to enlist. Lofty words like honor and glory no longer hold significance or rhetorical value. Frederick Henry of *A Farewell to Arms* comes to a similarly disillusioned conclusion:

I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped by bill posters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. (177)

Henry's repudiation of the idealism of war accompanied his own encounter with shell shock.

Earlier in the novel, Austrian artillery strike Henry's position, resulting in a momentary black-out

and serious injury to his leg, coupling the ideas of mental violence and disillusionment. Violence breeds cynicism. Horror enables disbelief.

*All Quiet on the Western Front* and *A Farewell to Arms* were published in 1928 and 1929, respectively, and aided in the popularization of the trope of disillusion within the literary market. The memory of The Great War was written ten years after its armistice, from around 1928 to 1932, predominantly by British middle-class poets called “subalterns.” Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Edmund Blunden are among these writers primarily responsible for the cultural memory of the First World War as a time in which young, idealistic men entered the war dreaming of the glory of battlefield victories and ending up as disillusioned veterans. Idealism and jingoistic patriotism were attributes relegated to the inexperienced, the political hack, or the general who directed men to their death from a cozy tent away from the treacherous front.

Of course, the trope of disillusionment fails to represent the experience of all soldiers. It is a generalization that gained more cultural traction, at least in literary circles, than patriotic or virtuous depictions of war. In the ten years between the armistice and 1928, many veterans published accounts that celebrated the honor and virtue of their experience in the conflict. “The 1920s were not a uniformly disenchanting age,” Isherwood explains in *Remembering the Great War*, “though many of the most popular war books reflected this theme. Disillusionment books were often present on the same publisher’s list as patriotic ones” (46). The process of privileging a cultural paradigm to view the war eventually weeded out the patriotic books from the disillusioned ones for a multitude of reasons. Among them was the enormous commercial success of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Coupled with the publication of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), Robert Graves’ *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), Edmund Blunden’s *Undertones of War* (1928), and Siegfried Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), the figure of the

disillusioned veteran became imprinted on the minds of the reading population. 1930 also saw two explicit attempts to canonize selected works. Edmund Blunden, himself considered a “disillusioned” writer, and historian Cyril Falls both sorted and categorized Great War literature into their bibliographies, with Blunden favoring more cynical works and Falls advocating a more balanced approach (Isherwood 57-59). Commercial success coupled with the anthologizing of cynical works eventually created the idea of disillusionment, a trope still potent today in studies of the Great War. Published in 1975, Paul Fussell’s *The Great War and Modern Memory* gave academic authority to the disillusioned paradigm, cementing its status as the war’s presumably correct interpretation.

### **Disillusionment and the Black Veteran**

The disillusionment of Black veterans inherently differed from that of their white counterparts. If we accept Fussell’s argument that the irony of the Great War is one in which a soldier’s expectations from the beginning of the war greatly differ from actual experience, Black involvement in WWI is doubly ironic. Near the beginning of the United States’ participation in the Great War, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote an editorial entitled “Close Ranks” in the July 1918 edition of the NAACP’s magazine *The Crisis*. Du Bois urged the Black community to “forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy” (111). Though Du Bois’ view was hardly unanimous within the Black community and his motivation for writing routinely questioned,<sup>2</sup> the editorial represented at least some of Black community’s willingness to fight for a country whose racism pervaded its laws and culture. Shane Smith writes that Du Bois “dreamed of a radically

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<sup>2</sup> See Shane Smith’s “‘The Crisis’ in the Great War” (240). Some contemporaries and historians argued that Du Bois’ patriotic stance was a result of his request for a commission in the army as an intelligence officer.

adjusted postwar society in the United States” that might appreciate the Black veteran population with increasing racial solidarity (239). Du Bois pressed for the training of Black officers, the increase of Black regiments, and the widespread recruitment of Black soldiers (249-251).

Du Bois’ expectations failed to predict reality during and after the war. While Black Americans from across the nation volunteered, they were regularly excluded from officer promotions and approximately 75 percent of the 200,000 Black soldiers in the American Expeditionary Force performed duties as servants and laborers. After studying the conditions of Black soldiers in the army, Du Bois found that white officers from the south were routinely put in charge of Black units, for they could better “handle” the ranks of Black soldiers (Smith 258-259). Medical professionals within the United States Army attempted to collect data on shell shock victims, but the data on Black soldiers experiencing psychological harm was tainted with racist and eugenicist rhetoric, distorting and failing to accommodate Black soldiers with psychological scars from the war (Dodman 119).

The most ironic tragedy resulting from Black service in the Great War was that Black volunteers were targeted by some white communities upon their return because of their status as veterans. In other words, they were targeted because they had served. Fear within some white communities that Black veterans would view their service as permission to acquire political rights ignited widespread and violent targeting of veterans. The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) states that “at least 13 veterans were lynched” during the Red Summer of 1919 when 25 anti-Black riots erupted in major cities throughout the United States. The EJI claims that Black veterans were also regularly deprived of medical service. The initiative recounts the story of Sergeant Henry Johnson, who was completely disabled from his service overseas. The army denied Johnson

medical service and discharged him without disability pay, leaving the veteran “to poverty and alcoholism” (“Lynching in America: Targeting Black Veterans”). The treatment of Black veterans during and after the war represents an even greater irony than Fussell imagines.

### **Sites of Laughter, Sites of Pain**

Though the Great War seems peripheral in *Sula*, Morrison’s marginal placement of Shadrack and National Suicide Day suggests the war’s permanent presence in the memory of the Bottom as both ironic and consolatory. The novel’s two initial chapters, as well as its two final chapters, create an inextricable connection between Shadrack, National Suicide Day, and the Bottom. In crafting the beginning of *Sula*, Morrison originally planned to introduce Shadrack and National Suicide Day in the first chapter, but she “recognized that it was a false beginning. ‘In medias res’ with a vengeance, because there was no *res* to be in the middle of—no implied world in which to locate the specificity and the resonances in the sentence (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 388). In other words, she recognized that Shadrack and the Bottom should be introduced together, one providing meaning to the other. The first chapter, “1920,” details the origin of the Bottom as a “nigger joke,” in which a former slave owner tricks a recently freed Black man into settling on land at the top of a hill because, from the perspective of God, it was “the bottom of heaven” (5). The barren land atop the hill yields little produce, is constantly ravaged by wind, and ensures the enduring poverty of the Black population that settles it. While the actions within the origin story are manipulative and coercive, the narrator relays it as a joke meant to express both pain and comforting humor. Similarly, the second chapter introduces Shadrack’s harrowing experience in the Great War and his implementation of National Suicide Day as a way of controlling the fear that follows him from the battlefield to the Bottom.

Eventually, National Suicide Day defines the psycho-social landscape of the Bottom, suggesting that Shadrack's character is not merely one who lives in the town, but one that defines it.

*Sula's* discontinuous and spiral narrative underscores the novel's beginning and end—or its margins—ironically emphasizing Shadrack's centrality in the plot. Justine Baillie provides a useful summary of *Sula's* discontinuities: "the use of dates as chapter titles suggests linearity and yet the content belies any implication that significant events are continuous" while also disrupting "conventional linear narrative form through the evocation of absence" (81). That *Sula* contains chapter titles suggesting linearity indicates Morrison's intention to break with that traditional pattern of the realist novel. The absence of years, indeed eras, between the novel's chapters troubles the plot's potential for linear development and the repetition of similar events throughout the book makes its narrative recursive. Similarly, Morrison upends linear character development in her rendering of Shadrack. Shadrack shows signs of a promising future before the war and emerges from the violence broken, without even the possibility of a fruitful life. The novel narrates Shadrack's mental decline as a clear break from a coherent past into a chaotic present. The narrator alludes briefly to Shadrack's past by suggesting that he was once a promising, handsome man before the war: "Even the most fastidious people in the town sometimes caught themselves dreaming of what he must have been like a few years back before he went off to war." The narrator describes him as "a young man of hardly twenty, head full of nothing and his mouth recalling the taste of lipstick" (7). His enlistment in the Great War marks a distinct, interrupting experience that spoils the fruit of his future. While those fastidious observers of the Bottom wonder what Shadrack must have been before the war, Morrison also invites concern about Shadrack's stolen adulthood. We must wonder about the counter-factual

future, the “what could have been,” of Shadrack’s life, with all his handsomeness and mental facilities intact.

Through Shadrack, Morrison reverses the idea of progress by emphasizing his interrupted and unrealized future. The abruptness of Shadrack’s misfortunes reflects the war’s physical and mental interruption in his character’s life. While Shadrack still recalls the taste of lipstick on his lips, Morrison transports him from the Bottom to fields of violence: “Shadrack had found himself in December, 1917, running with his comrades across a field in France” (7). Shadrack “found” himself in war as though he were unconscious of the history immediately before his belligerency. Morrison narrates Shadrack into being without recalling any enlistment, basic training, or transportation overseas; he is at once handsome and young and then, one narrative moment later, marching through the fields of France. The immediacy of the story’s narrative reflects Shadrack’s own lack of anticipation for violence. It appears he has no time or space to prepare for war: “Shellfire was all around him, and though he knew that this was something called *it*, he could not muster up the proper feeling – the feeling that would accommodate *it*” (7, Morrison’s italics). One must ask if there is any real time or space adequate for preparing oneself for such violence. The answer may very well be no, yet Shadrack’s transformation from civilian to target of enemy artillery happens so quickly in the novel that it suggests a break in Shadrack’s history.

Morrison’s abruptness in narrating Shadrack’s development may support Fussell’s claim that the Great War “reversed the Idea of Progress” (8) more than the published accounts of Sassoon, Graves, or Blunden. Those narratives employ a predictable timeline whereby soldiers more gradually enter the military experience. Soldiers undergo enlistment, basic training, initial battlefield preparations in France, war, and then return. The soldier’s moral intuitions often

reflect this timeline: initial apprehension or excitement, the inculcation of martial values and languages (i.e. the virtues of patriotisms), a stage in which the soldier mediates his autonomy within the military apparatus in basic training, and then experiences the reality of warfare. These experiences are loudly absent in Shadrack's existence, framing his time on the battlefield as a distinct and irrevocable interruption in his life. The narrative precludes Shadrack from having the ability to emotionally anticipate or experience the Great War's brutality. "He expected to be terrified," Morrison writes, "or exhilarated – to feel *something* very strong. In fact, he felt only the bite of a nail in his boot, which pierced the ball of his foot whenever he came down on it" (7-8).

Shadrack's peculiar character arc sets the conditions for surprise for both the reader and the character in their experience of violence. By enabling such surprise, Morrison seeds the grounds for severe psychological trauma in Shadrack's character. Indeed, this surprise was thought, immediately after the war, as a key ingredient in the shell shock neurosis. Concerned by the great number of casualties of the war, Sigmund Freud rethought his long-held pleasure principle and its inability to explain the "war neurosis" of returned veterans without physical impairment. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud states that one of the chief causes of traumatic neurosis "seemed to rest upon the element of surprise, of fright" of violence or "gross mechanical force" (10-11). "I do not believe," he continues, "anxiety can produce a traumatic neurosis. There is something about anxiety that protects its subject against fright and so against fright-neuroses" (11). Shadrack suddenly finding himself in the war illustrates a war narration in which time and condition unify in the creation of psychological harm; the sudden, surprise onslaught of violence attacks a mind unable to defend against it.

Highlighting the gross inadequacy of mental health care for Black veterans, Shadrack wakes from his experience in the Great War in a veterans' mental institution, whose healthcare

workers seek to discharge the veteran as quickly as possible. The staff disparagingly aids Shadrack and commands him with thinly veiled and racist undertones: "Come on. Pick up that spoon. Pick it up, Private. Nobody is going to feed you forever" (9). As Hayley Stefan points out, "nobody is going to feed you forever" insinuates that Shadrack possesses a character flaw rather than mental illness. Stefan suggests that "this racial stereotype in the guise of medical knowledge undergirded additional stereotypes of Black Americans as lazy, ignorant, or mentally inferior" during the post-war care of Black veterans. Shortly after, the staff releases Shadrack and imprisons him "for vagrancy and intoxication" (13). Embodying the experience of countless Black veterans of WWI, Shadrack returns to violence at home after his time at war ends.

Shadrack's brief stint in the mental institution does more than metonymize the inadequacies of health care for Black veterans. The scene introduces the paradoxical concept of liberation through limitation that Shadrack demonstrates throughout the novel. Boundaries, lines of demarcation between one existence and the other, calm Shadrack's troubled mind. The feeling that "anything could be anywhere" (8) haunts him as he craves some division between fear and sanity. The veteran sees ugliness and fear surround him upon his return to the United States but finds solace in the boundaries between himself and fear. For example, Shadrack awakens in the hospital to the disgust at the provided food on a tray "divided into three triangles," only feeling relief after "all [the food's] repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the triangles—a balance that soothed him, transferred some of its equilibrium to him" (8). He imagines that his hands grow to enormous sizes but "when they bound Shadrack into a straitjacket, he was both relieved and grateful, for his hands were at least hidden and confined to whatever size they attained" (9). The straitjacket and the triangles of the tray act to limit Shadrack's growing fear that his existence will slip back into the bizarre violence of the Great

War front. The wild growth of his hands, which expand in a “higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk all over the tray and the bed” (8-9) only subsides when Shadrack can look at himself in the reflection of toilet water, when he can see the lines that shape his face and body and understand the color of his skin (13). “A black so definite, so unequivocal” heals Shadrack from the petrifying “apprehension that he was not real – that he didn’t exist at all” (13).

When Shadrack returns to the Bottom, Morrison depicts his loss of innocence with overt irony, substituting “madness” (15) for disillusion. Shadrack’s actions on National Suicide Day are both obscene and comical. Morrison describes the veteran as “drunk, loud, obscene, funny, and outrageous” (15). He emerges from his home “with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope” inviting the citizens of the Bottom “to kill themselves or each other” (14). The citizens are frightened by his physicality, for “his eyes were so wild, his hair so long and matted, and his voice so full of authority” that the people of Bottom vacated the streets upon his entrance. Here Shadrack operates in at least two modes: a flagrant break with every conceivable norm while simultaneously establishing clear boundaries to encompass the madness incurred during the war “to order and focus experience” (14) Shadrack incorporates both the cowbell and hangman’s rope, symbols of chattel slavery and lynching, to highlight and liberate himself from the violence in the United States. He uses a symbolically infused ceremony—the victory parade—to “make a place” (*Sula*, 14) for fear, defeat, and death. Shadrack’s National Suicide Day features what Michel Foucault calls “the modern experience of madness”: a “double movement of liberation and enslavement” (460). By binding fear within the confines of a ritualized procession, Shadrack liberates himself from its ever-present threat.

Shadrack created National Suicide Day as an ironic and humorous boundary between that horrible absurdity of war and the society to which he returned, creating “a place for fear as

a way of controlling it" (14). He did so by appropriating a traditional expression of commemoration: the victory parade. Taking this symbol of celebration, Shadrack subverts its common signification by inviting the citizens of Bottom "to kill themselves or each other" (14). Shadrack borrows federal, bureaucratic language—*National Suicide Day*—to name a procession of one man, in one town, in rural Ohio. The sole celebrant of National Suicide Day carries a cowbell, the tracking device of soon-to-be slaughtered cattle and a "hangman's rope," an almost universal signifier for lynching and suicide. On September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1919, General John Pershing led a procession of more than ten thousand soldiers of the Army's 1<sup>st</sup> Division down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in New York City ("Pershing to Lead 1<sup>st</sup> Division," *New-York Tribune*). Pershing chose 3,600 hand-picked men to march closely behind him as "Pershing's Regiment." He chose these men from across multiple divisions for their pristine looks; all of them other six feet tall, their immaculate uniforms suitable to walk behind America's military hero ("Pershing to Lead Heroes in Parade"). By contrast, Shadrack emerges from a shack on the riverbed, ragged and wild, hurling insults toward the population as he leads his one-man procession down Carpenter Road in Medallion (14-15). Shadrack not only humorizes death and injury in his annual marches, but also those Pershing-like processions whose sheer perfection robs it of authenticity and its ability to represent reality.

The sublimation of Shadrack's madness into the community defines the Bottom's psycho-social landscape as one operating between control and fear, understanding and incoherence, tradition and heterodoxy. After the initial shock of National Suicide Day in the Bottom, his ritual simply blends into the background: "Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things... In fact [the townspeople] had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into

their thoughts, into their language, into their lives" (15). Eventually National Suicide Day became a simple marker of time, like a holiday whose original meaning faded into obscurity not long after its inception. Asked how long her labor pains were, a woman in the Bottom answered "'Bout three days. The pains started on Suicide Day and kept up till the following Sunday. Was borned on Sunday. All my boys is Sunday boys" (15-16). That such an unorthodox ritual as National Suicide Day could be so easily normalized suggests a perpetual, ubiquitous, and communal violence that exists not merely in memory but in the present.

Plum, a second war veteran, encounters the same abrupt interruption of the war to his character arc. Like Shadrack, the reader doesn't experience Plum's initial training or deployment to France. Instead, we see Plum as a child and then, without warning, a soldier: "Eva's last child, Plum, to whom she hoped to bequeath everything, floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war" (45). The only glimpse of Plum before his belligerency in the war illustrates the boy's status as a dependent son. As a child, Plum's inability to have bowel movements forces Eva to use the "last bit of food she had in the world" (34) to force the child's defecation. Shortly after, the novel suggests that Eva sacrifices her own leg to an oncoming train to secure insurance money and provide for her family. These two narrative events situate Plum's character as infantile, dependent, and altogether unprepared for the violence enacted upon him in the war. Two sentences create the hope that Plum may still have a semblance of adulthood after the war: "He returned to the States in 1919 but did not get back to Medallion until 1920. He wrote letters from New York, Washington, D.C., and Chicago full of promises of homecomings," suggesting that Plum has the adult skill of moving around the country without assistance. Yet, Morrison conveys that "there was obviously something wrong." Finally, the veteran arrives home with his hair "neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes

were pointless and he had no socks" (45). Plum is still a child. Romantic ideals of manly virtue might suggest that war acts as a process of maturation, that it turns boys into men. But Morrison reverses these expectations: Plum is a man turned into a boy.

While Shadrack's war experience seems to deprive his character of a promising adulthood, violence reverses Plum's growth. Morrison suggests that the source of Plum's infantilization are those traumatic events he experienced in the war, which he was unprepared to apprehend. His family "waited for him to tell them whatever it was he wanted them to know" (45), presumably about the war, yet the veteran never narrates his experience. His silence suggests an inability to make coherent those events which occurred around him, maybe to him. Instead, Plum submits to an addiction to heroine. Lethargy, theft, and sloth follow the veteran's addiction, which ruins his ability to function in the narrative world as an adult.

Plum's regressive character cannot meet the demands of adulthood. He requires rehabilitative, long-term care which the wider society will not grant to a Black veteran. Left to himself, the only recourse for his care exists in an impoverished and alienated Black family. Eva eventually accepts her inability to care for a man whose experiences transformed him into a child. She reaches the limits of her power to care for her son:

Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carrin' on, just getting' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. ... Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. (71)

Although Morrison situates Plum's character as child-like, the reader gains the sense that however child-like the veteran may be, he is no longer innocent. Eva enters Plum's room to comfort him, rocking him back and forth like a child. While laying with him, she notices "balled-up candy wrappers and empty pop bottles" littered throughout his room, signifiers of his immaturity and childishness. However, when Eva attempts to drink the strawberry crush soft drink sitting on a *Liberty* magazine, she "discovered it was blood-tainted water and threw it to the floor" (46-47). The strawberry crush, a metaphor for Plum's infanthood, is instead the residue of a used heroine syringe. Moreover, that symbol of Plum's regression sat atop *Liberty* magazine, denoting that those lofty American ideals for which Plum fought were the catalytic forces behind his regression.

*Liberty* magazine is one of the many instances in which Morrison appropriates expressions of patriotism and honor to highlight the hypocrisy of U.S. society toward the returned Black veteran. Yet she also employs symbols of bereavement and loss, steeped in religious and romantic imagery, so that her characters can make sense of their previous trauma. Morrison's use of tradition is therefore not one or the other: it is neither a direct repudiation of the past nor simply a comfortable method of bereavement and mourning. Morrison's irony is one which depends on rituals of mourning to confine a boiling madness, resulting in an ever-present tension that operates in a zone outside of the two literary camps designed to generalize the expressive response to the Great War. In this manner, Morrison works alongside countless war memorials after the 1918 armistice. Such memorials sought to glorify the nobility of the soldier while illuminating the hideous truth of death. Winter writes that "these two motifs – war as both noble and uplifting *and* tragic and unendurably sad" pervade such memorials; memorialists "never fixed" an "enduring formula" (85) between those two motifs to signify the realities of war.

Similarly, Morrison uses no enduring formula; instead, the characters of *Sula* operate on the precarious ground on the precipice of madness.

Such precarious footing is best exemplified by Eva's last moments with Plum. One evening, she discovers Plum slumbering in his room before wrapping his body within her arms, rocking him like a child. "'Hey, man. Hey. You holdin' me, Mamma,'" Plum asks, clumsily. He is in the delirious throes of a drug-induced slumber: "Mamma, you so purty. You so purty, Mamma" (46-47). The moment evokes images of one of the most popular and prevalent icons of post-Great War commemoration: the Pietà, an image prevalent in late-nineteenth-century funerary art used by post-war memorialists "to express the sadness of the millions who had lost their sons" in war (Winter, 1995, 90). The Pietà depicts a fallen body in the arms of its mother, encapsulating the incalculable grief of a lost child within the image of a mother's last act of comfort. Eva similarly holds her son in a hopeless attempt to comfort him. Yet, Plum's final comfort comes in a fiery death, worth quoting in full here:

Plum on the rim of a warm light sleep was still chuckling. Mamma. She sure was something.' He felt twilight. Now there seemed to be some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell. It wound itself—this wet light—all about him, splashing and running into his skin. He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything was going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep.

(47)

Eva then "rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick... lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight" (47). Plum dies a fiery death at the hands of the

mother whose arms just gave him comfort. Ironic? Surely. Yet we nevertheless sense the sincerity with which Plum receives his last comforts—verbalized in the religious language of baptisms and blessings—before his death. Morrison does not simply ironize, or subvert the expectations or functions of, religious language. Instead, these so-called “traditional” expressions offer consolation in a no-man’s land between coherence and insanity, between life and death.

Other instances are less equivocally ironic. Morrison’s depiction of military uniforms signifies tragic irony so strongly that she likens the uniform to excrement. After the First World War and even now, the combatant uniform symbolizes volunteerism, fulfillment of duty, and the willingness to sacrifice for a national cause. Post-war memorialists often appropriated traditional images commemorating sacrifice and imbedded a military uniform into the iconography, applying it to that lost generation of soldiers. Albert Figel, for example, designed an image of a uniformed “dead soldier attended by three angels,” mimicking the iconographic image of Christ’s body surrounded by the two Marys and St. John (Winter 91). Morrison takes the symbolism of the uniform, however, to expose the injustices of returning Black veterans. As Nel and her mother, Helene, travel to the south on a segregated train, the conductor accosts Helene for traversing the “whites-only” section of train cars. Two soldiers watch the scene in “shit-colored uniforms and peaked caps,” initially with a degree of indifference (21). Once Helene “smiled dazzlingly” at the “salmon-colored face of the conductor,” however, the soldiers became visibly incensed. Nel saw “the muscles of their face tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble. No change in their expression of the eyes, but a hard wetness that veiled them as they looked at the stretch of her mother’s foolish smile” (21-22). As Chuck Jackson writes, uniformed veterans represented the face of America after the Great War. Here, the two

uniformed Black soldiers represent “a two-faced nation: the men have risked injury and death for a nation that subordinates them with the threat of violence” (380). For the Black soldiers, Helene’s audacious smile is an expression of familiar civility with the conductor, one that even they—veterans of a Great War—don’t receive from their own nation. Jackson rightly points out that the soldiers’ shit-colored uniforms are “an excremental smear on the national importance of Black men” (381). Morrison’s project, in this instance, ironizes icons to problematize the ideals upon which they stand.

National Suicide Day employs the same irony to limit and constrain the community’s angst, frustration, and even madness. Morrison infuses National Suicide Day with the notion of boundaries, both psychological and physical. Formally, *Sula* begins and ends with National Suicide Days, quite literally establishing the boundaries of the novel. Yet National Suicide Day’s also implements boundaries between madness and normality and establishes the Bottom’s character as a community with irony pervading its language and atmosphere. While National Suicide Day acts as an overt symbol of irony, it also provides Shadrack and the citizens of Bottom a ritualized outlet for frustration and an acceptable form of madness. It is perhaps in the procession’s irony, even humor, that sentiment is most sincerely expressed.

Humor defangs atrocity by taking the most gruesome and grave aspects of war and making them the subject of ridicule. In other words, humor allows soldiers to grapple with and communicate trauma by removing its seriousness. Fussell calls this “Black Humor,” and quotes a British journalist who covered the First World War as saying “the more revolting it was, the more ... [soldiers] shouted with laughter” (8). Once joked about, terror loses its hold on the humorist and audience, lessening its ability to debilitate the mind. Death and injury are those subjects about which soldiers often joke. Paul Bäumer of *All Quiet* reflects that:

The terror of the front sinks deep down when we turn our back upon it; we make grim, coarse jests about it, when a man dies, then we say he has nipped off his turd, and so we speak of everything; that keeps us from going mad; as long as we take it that way we maintain our own resistance. (140)

Humorizing the grave subjects of death, as well as physical and psychological harm, allow Paul and his comrades to keep terror at bay, to establish a boundary between themselves and madness.

Like Bäumer, Shadrack constructs boundaries of humor to keep madness at bay because the war destroyed any demarcation between reality and the violent surrealism of battle. In this manner, National Suicide Day's origins reflect the Bottom's: it all started with "a joke. A Nigger Joke... the kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn't come, or come for weeks, and they're looking for a little comfort somehow" (4-5). In other words, irony and comedy collide to protect the community from a harsh and unforgiving reality. Shadrack is the narrative's first casualty for crossing a boundary on the western front. "For several days" Shadrack and his compatriots "had been marching, keeping close to a stream that was frozen at its edges. At one point they crossed it, and no sooner had he stepped foot on the other side than the day was adangle with shouts and explosions" (7). Shadrack crossed a line from an orderly march into an existence without boundaries or regulations. The surreal pervaded this boundaryless existence: Shadrack "saw the face of a soldier near him fly off" until "the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet" (8). "But stubbornly" he remembers, "the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace" (8). The line between life and death blurred; the incoherence of industrialized warfare and psychological madness blended to create a bizarre absurdity.

The novel's last National Suicide Day illustrates the simultaneity of mockery, irony, and consolation. What the citizens of Bottom had for years feared, hidden from, or casually mocked, now grows contagious. As Shadrack walks down Carpenter Road, he for the first time encountered "lines of delighted faces" (159). Children joined his procession, dancing and laughing around him in celebration of National Suicide. By the novel's end, Morrison makes clear that Shadrack is not the only character who requires an avenue for frustration: "this respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before" (160) invited the people of Bottom to finally join the battered veteran in his annual walk through town. Shadrack's personal trauma now acutely manifests as communal pain, requiring communal mourning and commemoration. In National Suicide Day's last ironic action, the marchers walk under the mouth of the tunnel excavation, their own *Arc de Triomphe*, and destroy it: "Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build" (161). By destroying the tunnel, many of the celebrants destroyed themselves, for the earth shifted underneath their feet as they attacked the arc, until its walls trapped them "in a chamber of water" beneath it (162). Shadrack invites Bottom to kill itself and some members finally took him up on the offer. Though Shadrack creates the spectacle of National Suicide Day in images of tragic irony, both the veteran and the Bottom partook in the procession through a sincere desire for consolation: they required boundaries to structure their existence and as an outlet for repressed frustration. The memory of the Great War, with its blend of the fantastic and real, its tragedy and comedy, and its normalized madness, is imbedded in every crevice of the Bottom. Rather than function as oppositions, these characteristics exist simultaneously in *Sula* and combine into a consolatory madness exemplified in Shadrack's character.

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