A Dream Deferred Essay, Research Paper

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

While Langhston Hughes authors this poem, A Dream Deferred, it can easily be interpreted as Toni Morrison s description of Nel and her life of sorrow and dissatisfaction. Sula and Nel, the protagonists in Toni Morrison s Sula, are each the only daughters of mothers whose distance leaves the young girls with dreams to erase this solitude and loneliness. There is no question that Sula alleviates this aloneness with a lascivious and experimental life, “I m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world”(143). Nel, however, for the most part, fails terribly at realizing her dreams and experiencing a happy existence. Compromising her individuality, her emotional stability, and her dreams mark Nel s banal and unfulfilling life.

Early in Nel s life during a trip to New Orleans, she watches as her mother is humiliated by a train s white, racist conductor; she watches the indignity of her mother s having to squat in an open field to urinate while white train passengers gaze; and she watches her mother s shame at her own Creole mother s libidinous lifestyle. Her mother s submissiveness and humiliation evokes a fear, an anger, and an energy in Nel. Her emotions intensify as she makes a declaration to never be her mother, to never compromise her individuality, “I m me. I m not their daughter. I m not Nel. I m me. Me”(28). Figuring that her “me-ness” will take her far, she exclaims “I want I want to be wonderful”(29). However, that trip to Louisiana “was the last as well as the first time she was ever to leave Medallion”(29).

Initially, Nel s self-declaration empowers her to pursue that dream of independence. She gathers power and joy, and “the strength to cultivate a friend in spite of mother”(29). Nel achieves a degree of her self-described “me-ness,” her dream, a separation from her subservient and disgraceful mother, resulting in a new found complacency, “Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula”(29). This happiness was present in both girls, “Their meeting was fortunate for it let them use each other to grow on”(49). Unfortunately, as she left Medallion only one time, Nel would discover and enjoy this “me-ness” only one time.

With her marriage to Jude, Nel abandons any dreams of “me-ness”. She is chosen as Jude s wife, a sign of ownership or possession; she does not choose to be Jude s wife. Nel hopes that Jude s dreams “of being taken (for a job on the road crew). Not just for the good money, more for the work itself”(81) and that “he wanted someone to care about his hurt”(82) will become hers, “She seemed receptive, but hardly anxious”(82). However, by trying to accommodate and understand Jude s desires and hurt, she must compromise her own dreams of individualism. Therefore, Nel is forced, although she never openly objects, into the role of a housewife. Against all of her dreams, she has become the dreaded role of her mother, a traditional black housewife contented by children, her husband, and whatever the townsfolk deemed proper and acceptable. This transformation into her mother exemplifies Nel s loss of individuality. In fact, Nel s independence dissolves to the extent that she cannot recognize herself, “She didn t even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips”(84). Even Toni Morrison admits that Nel has lost her “me-ness”, “The two of them together would make one Jude”(83).

When Jude leaves, after his betrayal with Sula, Nel suffers emotional torment and further problems from her failure to achieve “me-ness”. It is at this juncture in the work that Toni Morrison employs a unique image to represent Nel s dream:

The mud shifted, the leaves stirred, the smell of overripe green things enveloped her and announced the beginnings of her very own howl.

The odor evaporated; the leaves were still, the mud settled. And finally there was nothing, just a flake of something dry and nasty in her throat. She stood up frightened. There was something just to the right of her, in the air, just out of view. She could not see it, but she knew exactly what it looked like. A gray ball hovering just there. ..Quiet, gray dirty ball. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight. She knew she could not look (109)

This passage illustrates Nel s anguish and feelings of failure. The motion and progress of the mud and the leaves in the first paragraph as well as the odor of “green overripe things” represent the hope and action that Nel once had with her “me-ness”. Additionally, the “howl” parallels Nel s former readiness and energy to commence her journey for individuality. However, as the “odor evaporated”, “leaves were still”, and “mud settled”, so does Nel s dream fester like a sore. Until there is nothing left, except a harsh reminder of what once was, “something dry and nasty in her throat”. Once again she is frightened as she was when she watched her mother s humiliation and submissiveness and made her bold self-declaration of “me-ness”. This time, however, she is scared that her dream is lost, but she can sense that it still exists although she cannot see it. It is a “gray dirty ball” with a little substance , but “no weight”. The ball corresponds to her dream, which still survives, but her dream is nearly dead, with “no weight”.

Twenty-five years later after Sula s death, Nel realizes that she allowed herself to defer her dream until it is too late. Once again, Morrison, utilizes a gray ball with images of leaves and mud to establish the death of Nel s “me-ness”. “Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze”(174). Finally, the dream explodes, and Nel can only reflect. She has wasted opportunities for self-discovery and happiness while her closest friend experienced individuality and joy. After visiting Sula s grave, Nel grasps how crucial Sula was, and how much she coveted Sula s company and lifestyle. As the story closes with her dreams only a figment of her childhood with Sula, Nel breaks down, “It was a fine cry-loud and long- but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow”(174). Nel had lived like the book ends with “circles and circles of sorrow”, like a dream deferred.

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