

COMPELLING COMMENTS

Rorschach Nevus

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In the novel *Sula* by Toni Morrison, a powerful use of symbolism was expressed in the main antagonist's skin. Sula Peace was described as a "heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose."¹

The most interesting facet of Sula's birthmark is how it is perceived differently by different characters. The shape that other characters perceive her mark perhaps says more about them than about Sula. Sula's birthmark functioned as a Rorschach test of sorts for various characters in the novel. To the people of the Bottom, the predominantly black community in which the characters grow up, Sula embodies adventure, freedom, passion, danger, and independence; values that are in stark contrast to the community's societal norms. As such the people of the Bottom despise Sula and view her birthmark as something threatening and fearful. The community perceives the mark looks like a snake. To Shadrack, who made a living from fishing, Sula's birthmark looked like a tadpole. A World War I veteran suffering from "shell shock", Shadrack undergoes a psychological metamorphosis through the story. To Jude, the mark also resembled a

snake. Symbolic of the serpent in the garden of Eden, the mark becomes archetypal of the sin that the married Jude commits when he has a sexual affair with Sula. In Dermatology, the skin has traditionally been portrayed as a window to the internal state of the body. Rarely however, do we consider how the skin can give us insight into ourselves, a mirror within the window.

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