

REVUE INTERNATIONALE D'ETUDES SOCIALES,  
DE PHILOSOPHIE, D'EDUCATION ET D'ETHIQUE

**ISSN : 1840-7559**

**Dépôt légal N°7056 du 16 janvier 2014, Bibliothèque Nationale, 1<sup>er</sup> Trimestre**

**Laboratoire Interdisciplinaire d'Etudes Sociales, de  
Philosophie, d'Education et d'Ethique (LIESPEE)**

**Presses Scolaires et Universitaires du Bénin (PSUB)  
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**Presses Scolaires et Universitaires du Bénin (PSUB)**  
**REVUE CHRYSIPPE**  
**REVUE INTERNATIONALE D'ETUDES SOCIALES,**  
**DE PHILOSOPHIE, D'EDUCATION ET D'ETHIQUE**

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*Le projet de la « Revue Chrysippe » a bénéficié des conseils des Professeurs Thiémélé BOA de la Côte d'Ivoire, Willy BONGO-PASI de la RDC, Yaovi AKAKPO du Togo, Ludovic Fié DOH de la Côte d'Ivoire et des Professeurs Gauthier BIAOU et Euloge AGBOSSOU du Bénin.*

*Nous tenons à leur témoigner notre gratitude ainsi qu'aux Professeurs Augustin K. DIBI de la Côte d'Ivoire et Mahamane SAVADOGO du Burkina Faso qui ont bien voulu accepter de présider le Comité scientifique.*

Godomey / Savi, le 28 octobre 2013

Professeur Paulin HOUNSOUNON-TOLIN

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## Quatrième Partie

### Etudes comparées

## 'NIGGER' AS USED IN SULA BY TONI MORRISON, PEJORATIVE OR POSITIVE?

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### Abstract

*In Sula, second novel written by Toni Morrison, exist two communities living separately: the Whites and the Blacks. In the prologue, the narrator is explaining what has happened to the Bottom, the black neighborhood in the Ohio hills above the valley town of Medallion. Medallion's white citizens are moving up into the Bottom and building homes, television towers, and plush golf courses. The Bottom's black residents are moving down into the valley. When the novel ends, the year is 1965, and the narrator informs more the readers about this neighborhood metamorphosis. In her explanation, Toni Morrison uses at the same time the following words: nigger, black, slave, etc. all these words refer to the black community living in Ohio, USA. In fact, Blacks went through various gloomy periods in the Americas, they were called either nigger, negger, negro, black, slave, or African American.*

*This paper aims at providing the very origins and evolution of the concept throughout the history of slavery in America. As a matter of fact, 'nigger' can be used to mean 'black' in general sense; it can also take a pejorative sense and becomes synonym of slave in a specific period in America. In this sense it refers to the sad period of slavery and its negative aspects in America. This voyage back in history can help to investigate the use of 'nigger' in the fiction work authored by Toni Morrison.*

**Keywords:** Nigger, slave, negro, black, white, master.

### Resumé

*Sula, second roman de Toni Morrison, décrit deux communautés vivant côte à côte mais séparées: les Blancs et les Noirs. Dans le prologue, le narrateur nous explique ce qui s'est produit avec Bottom, village peuplé de Noirs situé sur les collines de Ohio au-dessus de la ville de Medallion dans la vallée. Les Blancs de Medallion sont en déplacement vers les collines de Bottom où ils construisent des maisons, des émetteurs de télévision et des terrains de golf. Dans le même temps, les Noirs se déplacent vers la vallée où vivaient les Blancs. Le roman prend fin en 1965 et le narrateur informe davantage le lecteur par rapport à la métamorphose subie par les deux communautés. Dans son explication, il utilise à la fois les mots nigger, black, slave, etc; pour désigner la communauté noire vivant à Ohio. En effet, les Noirs ont traversé différentes sombres périodes dans les Amériques. On les désignait aussi bien par 'nigger', 'negger', 'negro', 'black' ou Africains américains.*

*Cet article vise à explorer l'origine, l'évolution de 'nigger' à travers l'histoire de l'esclavage en Amérique. En effet, 'nigger' peut être utilisé pour désigner simplement un noir comme il peut prendre le sens péjoratif pour désigner un esclave dans le contexte américain. Péjoratif, 'nigger' fait venir à la mémoire la période lugubre d'esclavage et ses conséquences aux USA. Ce voyage dans le passé historique des USA permet de mener des investigations sur l'utilisation faite de 'nigger' dans la fiction de Toni Morrison.*

**Mots-clés:** Nigger, esclave, négro, Noir, Blanc, maître.

## INTRODUCTION

Morrison's most revolutionary act in America has been to write for black readers about black people. By this act alone, she has challenged white hegemony, but most important, she has credited the complexity and originality of African American life by working within its intricate and rich system of meaning, language, and art. The strength and richness of Morrison's childhood is responsible for her adult love and admiration for black people and her dedication to portraying them more multidimensionally than as victims. She is fundamentally concerned with the significance of place, history, myth, essence, and presence. Her foundation of sense of self was also strengthened by the cohesiveness of the small black Lorain community that nurtured her for seventeen years, one she left only to go college. It is a village in the traditional African sense. *Sula*, her second novel fits in this pattern, the setting is in an area known as "The Bottom," which is a hilly area above the valley town of Medallion, Ohio. In *Sula*, the focus of this study, Morrison has used the following terms: nigger, negro, black which refer to the same reality but in different epochs. My very concern is to focus on the word 'nigger' to see its meaning in *Sula* for more clarity and understanding. The use of 'nigger' together with the others mentioned early can trace back to the history of the people from African descent in the USA.

My attempt is to analyze chiefly the way the term 'nigger' and its derivative words are used in the novel in order to see if they reflect the positive meaning or the pejorative one. Such an investigation can help to shed light on the evolution of mentalities vis-à-vis African Americans in the 20th century.

### I. CONTEXT

Morrison has been known and admired for her historicizing of literary texts, and widely praised for having been able to combine deep psychological insight with a vigorous and original critique of American history (Rustie 2008). In an interview for *The Guardian* she explains how she starts the creative process:

My books are always questions for me. What if? How does it feel to...? Or what would it look like if you took racism out? Or what does it look like if you have the perfect town, everything you ever wanted? And so you ask a question, put it in a time when it would be theatrical to ask, and find the people who can articulate it for you and try to make them interesting. (Morrison qtd. in Rustie 2008).

Morrison made use of the same strategy to write *Sula* punctuated with ironical tone to portray realities about the black community in America. The opening chapter, the prologue, of *Sula* is a concentration of elements that recall the sad past of African Americans. This chapter has no title, and can be entitled: Nigger joke. Since Morrison has undertaken to use years to identify chapters in *Sula*, the question raises to know which year she can mention to entitle it. The complexity of the concept (nigger) will take her to see far back in history to find the right period corresponding to the historical context of 'nigger'. But before coming to the historical background, it is important to plunge deep into the semantic aspect of 'nigger' in *Sula*.

## II. MEANING OF 'NIGGER' IN SULA

Morrison begins the novel with a short prologue that focuses on change: the leveling of a black neighborhood - the Bottom, situated in the hills above the valley town of Medallion, Ohio - in order to create a golf course for white people. Years ago, in the 1920s, only white people lived in Medallion and only black people lived in the Bottom; now, the Bottom has become a suburb of the valley town, and the white people who formerly would never have set foot in the black community vastly outnumber their black counterparts.

The prologue mentions 'nigger' in two nouns phrases in the following manner: 'A joke'; 'a nigger joke'; 'just a nigger joke.' Morrison insists on 'joke' to which is associated 'nigger'. The very first phrase is 'A joke' in which 'nigger' is silenced. It is a way to paint reality in a less serious manner in order to transform drama into simplest and trivial mode. The use of such gradation is a strategy to teach reality in a very soft way. It also helps convey the message in much more engaging and notable way. The aura that is created by the usage of repetition cannot be achieved through any other device. It has the ability of making a simple sentence sound like a dramatic one and vice versa. It enhances the beauty of a sentence and stresses on the point of main significance. It is less chocking to use 'nigger' with 'joke'. The following paragraph provides a synonym for 'nigger'. It says:

A good white farmer promised freedom and piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy - the farmer had no objection to that. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile."<sup>1</sup>

'Nigger' in the passage is used to mean 'slave' supposed to perform 'very difficult chores' i.e. unprofitable, unpleasant, difficult tasks to perform. The hyperbolic use of adverb 'very' can confirm the inhuman conditions imposed on this slave. The use of 'white farmer' replaced later by 'master' helps to set the frame that determines the use of 'nigger' in Sula. In the American context, slavery concerns both white (master) and black (slave). Here Morrison has created an opportunity to stress the dark past of the black community in America. For clarity purpose, I find it necessary to question the genesis of the word 'nigger'.

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison, Toni. Sula. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., p. 5.

### III. Genesis of nigger

Nigger originated as a neutral term referring to black people. Neger and negar are variants of nigger. They derive from the Spanish and Portuguese word negro (black), and from the now-pejorative French nègre (nigger). Etymologically, negro, noir, nègre, and nigger ultimately derive from nigrum, the stem of the Latin niger (black). Nigger in its first aspect refers to Blacks in general, it has no negative or pejorative meaning. Successful settlements in the New World created a new phenomenon related to the abundant use of labor force to develop crops such as cotton, sugar, tobacco, etc. Colonists failed to find the required labor force in the rank of their compatriots, they turned to Indians with little satisfaction. Blacks only could satisfy them, they support hard work and harsh living conditions. Morrison, in her description insists on the harshness of the shore. The actions in *Sula* take place in Ohio, in a community where black people live. From this setting, I find it indispensable to see the evolution of the word (nigger) in America from the colonial era to the modern town.

In the Colonial America of 1619, John Rolfe used negars in describing the African slaves shipped to the Virginia colony. Later American English spellings, neger and neggar, prevailed in a northern colony, New York under the Dutch, and in metropolitan Philadelphia's Moravian and Pennsylvania Dutch communities; the African Burial Ground in New York City originally was known by the Dutch name "Begraafplaats van de Neger" (Cemetery of the Negro); an early US occurrence of neger in Rhode Island, dates from 1625. An alternative word for African Americans was the English word, "Black", used by Thomas Jefferson in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) is a book written by Thomas Jefferson. He completed the first version in 1781, and updated and enlarged the book in 1782 and 1783. *Notes on the State of Virginia* originated in Jefferson's responding to questions about Virginia, posed to him in 1780 by François Barbé-Marbois, then Secretary of the French delegation in Philadelphia, the temporary capital of the united colonies. Often dubbed the most important American book published before 1800, *Notes on the State of Virginia* is both a compilation of data by Jefferson about the state's natural resources and economy, and his vigorous and often eloquent argument about the nature of the good society, which he believed was incarnated by Virginia. He expressed his beliefs in the separation of church and state, constitutional government, checks and balances, and individual liberty. He wrote extensively about slavery, the problems of miscegenation, and his belief that whites and blacks could not live together in a free society because they are different. He wrote:

The first difference which strikes us is that of color. Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf skin, or in the scarf skin itself; whether it proceeds from the color of the blood, the color of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in Nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance ? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of

beauty in the two races ? Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of color in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony which reigns in the countenances, that immovable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race ? Add to these flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favor of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species. The circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals ; why not in that of man ? Besides those of color, figure and hair, there are other physical distinctions proving a difference of race. They have less hair on the face and body. They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor. This greater degree of transpiration renders them more tolerant of heat, and less so of cold, than the whites. Perhaps, too, a difference of structure in the pulmonary apparatus, which a late ingenious experimentalist \* has discovered to be the principal regulator of animal heat, may have disabled them from extricating, in the act of inspiration, so much of that fluid from the outer air, or obliged them in expiration, to part with more of it. They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labor through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning. They are at least as brave, and more adventuresome. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present. When present, they do not go through it with more coolness or steadiness than the whites.

They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient.

Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether Heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labor. An aftimal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course. Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason, and imagination, it appears to me that in memory they are equal to the whites ; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid ; and that in imagination they are dull, tasteless and anomalous.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jefferson, Thomas. Notes on Virginia. Edited by William Peden : Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955. Pp. 149-154.

This description, not only does it describe the black, but also it portrays his inferiority vis-à-vis the whites. Black, in the context of Thomas Jefferson, is synonym of nigger.

Among Anglophones, the word nigger was not always considered derogatory, because it then denoted “black-skinned”. Nineteenth-century English (language) literature features usages of nigger without racist connotation. *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), a novella written by Joseph Conrad is an example.

*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is often regarded as the best of Conrad's early periods as a writer. It is narrated by an anonymous seaman. The action concentrates on the human community and their relationships aboard the merchant ship, the *Narcissus*, on its way from Bombay to London. The tensions within that small number are as perilous as the weather itself especially with the raging storm and are produced partly by two different generations of seamen.

The character, James Wait, is a West Indian black sailor on board the merchant ship *Narcissus* sailing from Bombay to London. During the voyage, Wait falls ill with tuberculosis. His illness and confinement arouses human sympathies from many of the crew, five of whom rescue him from his deck cabin during the height of the storm, risking their own lives as well as the ship.

On the other hand, Captain Alistoun and the old sailor Singleton remain concerned primarily with their duties as sailors, indifferent to Wait's condition.

The younger Donkin who supports Wait's demands to go back on duty comes to a head with Captain Alistoun. In the end, the captain calmly reasserts a seaman-like authority, with the remaining crew looking on. Singleton's superstition that Wait will die at the first sight of land indeed comes true.

Conrad appears to suggest that humanitarian sympathies are, at their core, feelings of self-interest, and also, high sensitivity to suffering can be detrimental to managing a society. This novella is seen as an allegory of human solidarity as well as isolation amid society or community.

Moreover, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain created characters that used the word as contemporary usage. Twain, in the autobiographic book, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), used the term within quotes, indicating reported usage, but used the term “negro” when speaking in his own narrative persona.

During the fur trade of the early 1800s to the late 1840s in the Western United States, the word was spelled “niggur”, and is often recorded in literature of the time. George Fredrick Ruxton often included the word as part of the “mountain man” lexicon, did not indicate that the word was pejorative at the time. “Niggur” was evidently similar to the modern use of dude, or guy. It was never used as a term for blacks among the mountain man during this period, as Indians, Mexicans, and Frenchmen and Anglos alike could be a “niggur”.

By the 1900s, nigger had become a pejorative word. In its stead, the term colored became the mainstream alternative to Negro and its derived terms. Abolitionists in Boston, Massachusetts, posted warnings to the Colored People of Boston and

vicinity. Writing in 1904, journalist Clifton Johnson documented the “opprobrious” character of the word nigger, emphasizing that it was chosen in the South precisely because it was more offensive than “colored.” Established as conventional American English usage, the word colored features in the organizational title of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), reflecting the members’ racial identity preference at the 1909 foundation. In the Southern United States, the local American English dialect changes the pronunciation of Negro to nigra. Linguistically, in developing American English, in the early editions of *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806), lexicographer Noah Webster suggested the neger new spelling in place of Negro.

By the late 1960s, the social progress achieved by groups in the United States such as the Black Civil Rights Movement (1955–68), had legitimized the racial identity word black as mainstream American English usage to denote black-skinned Americans of African ancestry. In the 90’s, “Black” was later displaced in favor of the compound blanket term African American. Moreover, as a compound word, African American resembles the vogue word Afro-American, an early-1970s popular usage. Currently, some black Americans continue to use the word nigger, often spelled as nigga and niggah, without irony, to either neutral effect or as a sign of solidarity.

Historically, nigger is controversial in literature due to its usage as both a racist insult and a common noun. The white photographer and writer, Carl Van Vechten, a supporter of the Harlem Renaissance (1920s–30s), provoked controversy in the black community with the title of his novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), wherein the usage increased sales; of the controversy, Langston Hughes wrote:

No book could possibly be as bad as *Nigger Heaven* has been painted. And no book has ever been better advertised by those who wished to damn it. Because it was declared obscene, everybody wanted to read it, and I’ll venture to say that more Negroes bought it than ever purchased a book by a Negro author. Then, as now, the use of the word nigger by a white was a flashpoint for debates about the relationship between black culture and its white patrons<sup>3</sup>.

No other contemporary novel received the volume and intensity of criticism and curiosity that greeted *Nigger Heaven* upon its publication in 1926. Carl Van Vechten’s novel generated a storm of controversy because of its scandalous title and fed an insatiable hunger on the part of the reading public for material relating to the black culture of Harlem’s jazz clubs, cabarets, and social events.

Nigger is used in its pejorative sense and awakened curiosity among the New Negroes working endlessly to whitewash the image of the Blacks through artistic and literary achievements. This period following World War I was a period of revolt because Blacks happened to discover that they are as able as the White. They were

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<sup>3</sup> Robert F. Worth. “Nigger Heaven and the Harlem Renaissance”. *African American Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), p. 465.

accepted by Europeans during the World War I but rejected by their own countrymen. So Blacks in America got a new mentality and could not accept to be belittled anymore. By this time, Langston Hughes was recognized as one of the leading figures in the constellation of black writers, artists, and musicians in New York who created the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement of the late 1920s and early 1930s. He wrote:

The word nigger, you see, sums up for us who are colored all the bitter years of insult and struggle in America: the slave-beatings of yesterday, the lynchings of today, the Jim Crow cars, the only movie show in town with its sign up FOR WHITES ONLY, the restaurants where you may not eat, the jobs you may not have, the unions you cannot join. The word nigger in the mouths of little white boys at school, the word nigger in the mouths of foremen on the job, the word nigger across the whole face of America! Nigger! Nigger! Like the word Jew in Hitler's Germany<sup>4</sup>

Most of Harlem seems to have agreed that the book was vile and demeaning to the race. W. E. B. Du Bois waited several months before delivering his verdict in the December Crisis, and the interval had not mellowed his feelings. The book was a blow in the face, he declared, an affront to the hospitality of black folk and the intelligence of white. He refused to credit Van Vechten's ironic intentions with the title: " 'Nigger Heaven' does not mean, as Van Vechten once or twice intimates, a haven for Negroes—a city of refuge for dark and tired souls; it means in common parlance, a nasty, sordid corner into which black folk are herded, and yet a place which they in crass ignorance are fools enough to enjoy. Du Bois's overall judgment was based on Nigger Heaven's failure to cohere as either moral statement or work of art. But he expressed himself with a resentful scorn that suggests another motive. Nigger Heaven is concerned above all with highly educated and ambitious Harlemites, and it is not a flattering portrait. Whatever the author's sympathies, the book presents black intellectual life as a pathetic, almost futile endeavor, stifled by black snobbery on one side and white bigotry on the other. Du Bois may have felt this way sometimes himself, but to hear it from a white interloper like Van Vechten would have been infuriating.

Nigger as used in *Sula* is a slur directed to people of black complexion. Morrison tried to be less chocking by limiting to the joke to chores and land promise. Niggers were also ill-treated too. Morrison has taken the case of a 'good white farmer' to avoid displaying the sad sides of slavery. My intention is to devote a passage to the aspect regarding the punishments niggers were submitted to in order to dig out what Morrison tried to drop in her novel.

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<sup>4</sup> Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1940, pp. 268-29.

#### IV. PUNISHMENTS OF NIGGERS (SLAVES)

Corporal inflictions were used as corrective and demoralizing penalties for individual slaves and as exemplary measures to control other bonded blacks through terror and fear.

Corporal punishment was designed with various goals in mind. Broadly speaking, one could argue that its purpose was fivefold:

- (1) deter rebellious behavior;
- (2) instill fear to prevent defiance from becoming exemplary;
- (3) inculcate the Roman Catholic religion and prevent the expression of African spiritual practices and other forms of resistance to the colonizers' culture;
- (4) regulate sexual conduct in order to prevent miscegenation [miscere (to mix) and genus (race) ] and preserve clear-cut socioracial hierarchies; and
- (5) sustain the interests of various corporations or elite groups.

As if these laws did not allow for severe enough punishment, it has been generally recognized that they were ignored as the local authorities and masters interpreted them to best fit their specific circumstances and cruel creativity. In colonial Latin America, there was a generalized belief that "carelessness, laziness and an aversion to work are natural for the inhabitants of Africa"; therefore slaveholders thought it was necessary to subject them to a harsh regime and to perform exemplifying punishments. Slaves were also believed to be little more than a material good. By holding ownership rights, masters felt they could dispose of the slave according to their own judgment. Compassion was based on limiting the damage to their economic investment rather than on humanitarian motives. However, rage against runaways and rebels was particularly vicious because of the challenge they presented to the whole system. Historians have found accounts of escaped or rebellious slaves being roasted to death or hung on the island of Hispaniola, fitted with iron collars and thrown to hungry dogs in Panama, tortured and beheaded in Mexico, boiled to death in Costa Rica, dragged through streets and quartered in Uruguay, and branded with hot irons in Brazil.

Epifanio de Moirans, a Spanish priest, described such punishments in his 1682 testimony:

Other [slave owners] will burn [the slaves'] ribs with red hot irons, or apply a knife to their intimate parts; some will cut off pieces of meat or the testicles with a knife; but all of the slaves are jailed with chains, and are made to work this way or with a type of horn made of iron around their neck. Mules and horses are not so ill treated as are Christian slaves by the Catholics of the Indies ... The [master's] mistake is to believe that they have ownership over [the slaves] as over pigs; and as such some of the masters and mistresses proceed with furious passion and murder their slaves, drowning them and cutting them up into pieces ... Runaways that were captured were beaten until their bones were broken or they were hung by law or they were murdered by their captors ... In other regions fugitives that were caught received two hundred whippings and had their ears cut off.

These are excesses that I have seen and been informed of with all certainty, because I have been able to travel through regions of the Portuguese, Spanish and French, to see the good and bad works of men.<sup>5</sup>"

So many examples can be provided to show the level of cruelty niggers suffered in the Americas. But this exercise can take me far away from my objective which is to stick to Sula to investigate the use of Nigger together with Negro and black. Morrison has revealed the very attitude of the White (master) toward Niggers. This is noticeable with the trick the master used with the plot of land he promised.

### V. THE RUSE OF THE WHITE GOOD FARMER

This slave master promised land, but he was sure he could never complete the chores because they were so difficult. Amazingly, the Nigger was successful in completing it. In fact, "he didn't want to give up any land".<sup>6</sup> Niggers were not considered and white masters could abuse as they pleased. This attitude should not appear strange since Niggers were their properties and they could do whatever they want with them. They were less considered than the master's animals and could be used to pay back a debt. In Sula, the 'good farmer' accepted finally to give land but with the following irony:

So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The master said, "oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile."

"But it's high up in the hills," said the slave.

"High up from us," said the master, but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is."<sup>7</sup>

Here the master considers the slave as an ignorant creature that can be fooled at will without any consequences. This state of mind is common to slave masters when they come to consider that Blacks are subhuman creatures who need to be enslaved in order to give them an opportunity to get civilized.

For centuries, philosophers as varied as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and John Locke accepted slavery as part of a proper social system. Aristotle thought that slavery was a natural thing and that human beings came in two types - slaves and non-slaves. For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule. Natural slaves were slaves because their souls weren't complete - they lacked

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ipooa.com/slave\\_punishments.htm](http://www.ipooa.com/slave_punishments.htm) 5 May 2014 9:03:26 AM

<sup>6</sup> Morrison, Toni. Sula. Op. cit. p.5.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

certain qualities, such as the ability to think properly, and so they needed to have masters to tell them what to do.

Thomas's position on slavery can be summarized as follows. Following Aristotle, Thomas believes that some people are, through an intellectual limitation often influenced by race, natural slaves because it is in their own best interest. These slaves are not to be abused but can be physically punished for their own instruction. They should be trained in virtue by their masters to whatever level they are able to attain. They can marry and even, in some circumstances, be ordained as priests. In contrast to Aristotle, Thomas is more consistently opposed to conventional slavery. In general he finds this form of slavery abhorrent.

John Locke (1632–1704), the philosopher whose theory of natural rights helped to define the principles of modern democracy, wrote his *First Treatise of Government* (1690) to refute Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings* (written ca. 1638; published 1680). Against Filmer's belief in the absolute, God-given power of the monarch, Locke maintains the natural liberty of human beings; all people are born free, and the attempt to enslave any person creates a state of war (as opposed to the state of nature). Yet Locke himself had invested in the slave trade and drafted the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* (1669), which granted absolute power over slaves. This conflict is not Locke's alone; it represents the national conflict of theory and practice, of espousing freedom while profiting from the slave traffic.

All three philosophers, together with other fables, favored the havoc in which the victims are the Blacks. They all enjoyed slavery and took profit of it. They believed in the natural inferiority of the Blacks and the superiority of the Whites.

The objective of the 'good farmer' is finally to give his slave something impossible to till. He is sure his slave is obliged to abandon the land and come back to him for fear he starved. The land he got is described as follows: The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter<sup>8</sup>. This land is in an environment totally hostile to agriculture or even human life. The white people living in Medallion have decided not to stay there for the harshness and the non-productivity of the environment. The soil is a rocky and movable one, the winter is an unbearable one. The nigger was offered a place likely to lead him to destruction, to death. The 'good farmer' is quite aware of this reality and was waiting for the nigger's imminent disaggregation. Then he could take his land back for his property because he did not want to give it at the start. But the nigger was ill-treated that what the 'good farmer' had taken for hell was his paradise. About dehumanizing living conditions of niggers, I can remember Frederick Douglass's account of niggers' allowance in the following words:

Here, too, the slaves of all the other farms received their monthly allowance of food, and their yearly clothing. The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of

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<sup>8</sup> Morrison, Toni. Sula. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., p.5.

pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars. The allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stocking, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance-day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.

There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these. This, however, is not considered a very great privation. They find less difficulties from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day's work on the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and this is done, old and young, male and female, married or single, drop down side by side, on one common bed, - the cold, damp floor, - each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn. At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field.<sup>9</sup>

This passage illustrates clearly an aspect of the living conditions of the niggers; therefore the Bottom described as a hellish place by the 'good farmer' can become a paradise for his slave. He was used to living in difficult conditions of privation and working like a beast of burden for so many years, may be, from childhood to adulthood. The bottom was transformed into a community where blacks live and where flourish life and happiness. The Bottom has become an attraction. The Whites living in Medallion fainted before the charming appearance of the Bottom, they decided to move up to the once repulsive environment. The Bottom has become the suburb:

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom...

There will be nothing left of the Bottom (the footbridge that crossed the river is already gone), but perhaps it is just as well, since it

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<sup>9</sup> Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. New York: Dover Publications. Inc. P. 6.

wasn't a town anyway: just a neighborhood where on quiet days people in valley houses could hear singing sometimes, and , if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills - collecting rent or insurance payments - he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit a black bottom, a bit of "messaging around" to the lively notes of a mouth organ.<sup>10</sup>

As soon the white people of Madallion move to the Bottom to live in, the neighborhood changes its name to become a suburb. In fact, the white people here are conscious that it is not the bottom it was called, it was in the hills above the former the valley town of Medallion. Toni Morrison organizes the prologue in this manner to highlight an aspect of the psychology of the white man in America. They took Blacks for ignorant, immature creatures, the donkeys in human kind useful but for farm works and domestic shores. The Medallion whites waited for the blacks to transform the chaotic place into a community where life is safe and economic activities prosper then they move them away to settle a golf course and a television station. Blacks had no choice, they left the Bottom and joined the suburbs. The suburbs, according to Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, is the outer area of a town, rather than the shopping and business center in the middle. Blacks are chased away from the city, we don't know how but commonly they were compelled to respect decisions coming out from the whites, their masters. The blacks were stigmatized to be inferior and white, superior. For centuries, this was accepted by blacks but not all of them every time. In the twentieth century, DuBois referred to the Talented tenth<sup>11</sup> to whom he assigned the role of vanguard to the elevation of the consciousness of the rest of the Blacks under the yoke of physical and mental slaveries. As a matter of fact, the Talented Tenth is a term that designated a leadership class of African Americans in the early twentieth century. The term was publicized by W. E. B. Du Bois in an influential essay of the same name, which he published in September 1903. It appeared in *The Negro Problem*, a collection of essays written by leading African Americans.

The phrase "talented tenth" originated in 1896 among Northern white liberals, specifically the American Baptist Home Mission Society. They had the goal of establishing black colleges to train Negro teachers and elites.

"The Talented Tenth," is used to mean the leadership of the Negro race in America by a trained few. Du Bois used the term "the talented tenth" to describe the likelihood of one in ten black men becoming leaders of their race in the world, through methods such as continuing their education, writing books, or becoming directly involved in social change. He strongly believed that blacks needed a classical education to be able to reach their potential, rather than the industrial education promoted by the Atlanta compromise which was endorsed by Booker T. Washington and some white philanthropists.

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<sup>10</sup> Douglass, Frederick. Op. Cit. pp.3-4

<sup>11</sup> <sup>11</sup> Du Bois, William E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. U.S.A.: Signet Classic, 1903, 1969, p. 136

From the very first, it has been the educated and intelligent of the Negro people that have led and elevated the mass, and the sole obstacles that nullified and retarded their efforts were slavery and race prejudice.

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races. According to the doctrine of "the talented tenth," it is a necessity for the intellectual elite to lead the black race. As a result, the Negro race is emancipated and can never feel shy in front of any White man.

The Medallion niggers were compelled to support to whims of the White masters as long as they could, moving them at will or according their mood, their interest and their ambitions. The slave who played the major role in the nigger joke process was made to leave the Bottom for the genuine bottom where he would learn to live in a new environment. People may think the new environment can be easy to tame, but he was not trained to have similar taste with the whites; therefore he is submitted to try a new reform in order to adapt to his new environment. In short, the Blacks were submitted to situations that compelled them to start life anew, this took them to poverty and misery. It affected their psychology and made them to live like tramps and work like mules.

### CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison has used in *Sula* different words to refer to the Blacks living in the Bottom and then in the suburbs to draw the attention of the reader on the evolution of the mentalities concerning the conditions of African Americans in the United States of America. It is a way to shape the chaotic and hellish route of the Blacks before becoming full American citizens. They were called Black, slaves, niggers, neger, neggers, negroes, African Americans, etc. in different epochs in the American history. Nigger, as used in *Sula* bears a negative connotation since it refers to an unknown slave submitted to hardship and exploitation. Toni Morrison is inviting readers to revisit the history of the Blacks in America in order to appreciate the evolution of mentalities today. Another message behind the use of 'nigger' concerns the use of the word among Blacks in a friendly, positive way. It was a symbol of both solidarity and a call to fight for the betterment of their living conditions even though some didn't know how. The conjugated effort of the black race leaders led to citizenship with all their rights and equality. Toni Morrison writes novels to show different aspects of the black community in America with reference to their past, she criticizes the system of bondage and depicts its drawbacks through fiction works.

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