

## The Shell-Shocked Veteran in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Home*

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In *Sula* (1973) and *Home* (1973) Toni Morrison depicts the madness of the homecoming war veteran, whose symptoms and their consequences impair his life. Through the return of her traumatized African American soldiers, she explores the tensions of a racially-prejudiced America and the dire consequences for the black community and self. Morrison unveils the destruction that racism effects on blacks, both the physical and psychological violence. Hence *Sula* and *Home* become anti-war novels which portray anti-heroes, broken men, whose madness is associated with the war, but also with a racist America.

Keywords: African American soldiers; war veteran; shell-shock; post-traumatic stress disorder; home; racism

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## El veterano con neurosis de guerra en las novelas de Toni Morrison *Sula* y *Home*

En *Sula* (1973) y *Home* (1973) Toni Morrison explora la locura del veterano cuando retorna de la guerra, y el menoscabo que sufren sus circunstancias vitales, como síntoma y consecuencia de esa experiencia. Además, la exploración del retorno permite a la autora examinar las tensiones de una América segregacionista y los conflictos que genera en la comunidad afroamericana. Morrison revela la destrucción física y psicológica que el racismo produce en esta comunidad. Así, *Sula* y *Home* se convierten en novelas antibélicas que retratan antihéroes, hombres destrozados, cuya locura se asocia con la guerra, pero también con una América racista.

Palabras clave: militares afroamericanos; veterano de guerra; neurosis de guerra; estrés posttraumático; hogar; racismo

Morrison gives us just enough psychological complication of Frank Money to open up an understanding of how desperately malignant the realm of war can be. (Meisel 2013, n.p.)

In *Sula* (1973) and *Home* ([1973] 2012), Toni Morrison deals with the insanity of the war veterans Shadrack and Frank Money, who return home to the US, just after World War I (1914-1918) and the Korean War (1950-1953), respectively. As with modernist writers, such as Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford, Morrison seems to use the tribulations and emotional turmoil that these returning soldiers had to cope with back home to express the tensions of the society they returned to live in as well as the ensuing breakdown of social patterns.<sup>1</sup> Morrison depicts the symptoms they suffer and the reception of these damaged veterans by a racially-prejudiced America. Morrison's novels do not only unveil the appalling ordeals of war, questioning its meaning, but she also exposes the violence, discrimination and racism of the American society at the respective times. The oppression that white society exerts on each of them at times takes the form of outright physical violence, at others, the even more brutal psychological violence. In Morrison's shell-shocked soldiers, mental distress is connected both to the horrors of war and to the horrors of racist *Jim Crow* times.<sup>2</sup>

Morrison associates the notion of *shell-shock* with the broader term of trauma, which affects the black soldier in combat situations as well as in his civilian life.<sup>3</sup> Trauma, in its central position in Freud's texts, is understood as a wound inflicted upon the mind (Caruth 1996, 3). African Americans carry the burden of personal and collective cultural traumas, which can be traced back to the times of slavery and the Middle Passage, and are at the core of their communal memory and identity (Eyerman 2004, 60). Both of Morrison's veterans illustrate the possessive nature of trauma and how the brutal legacy of "slavery has not been laid to rest but resurfaces in the lives and actions of the protagonists" (Whitehead 2004, 85). As Dolores Herrero and Sonia Baelo-Allué argue, trauma theory stresses the "individual/psychological perspective" (2011, xi), although a societal and historical perspective would be more relevant to postcolonial literary studies. *Sula* and *Home* raise questions about the provision of communities of care during war and in its aftermath and reveals who truly bore the responsibility for offering health-care services. Their madness mirrors the terrors of war and the home world of American blacks: "*Home* [...] does foreground

<sup>1</sup> In the portrayal of the characters Septimus Warren Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* ([1925] 1996) and Christopher Tietjens in Ford Madox Ford's *Some Do Not...* ([1924] 2010) these authors try to communicate the social anxieties faced by their shell-shocked veterans, who reflect in many ways their modernist concerns, such as the metaphoric alienation, isolation and fragmentation of the individual in the midst of society.

<sup>2</sup> At the time, Jim Crow laws (state and local) enforced discrimination and segregation in the Southern US.

<sup>3</sup> *Shell-shock* is the World War I name for what is known today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a psychological condition connected to the trauma of battle. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines *shell-shock* as "an ill-defined medical condition characterized by lassitude, fatigue, headache and irritability, associated chiefly with emotional disturbance" (2000-, s.v.).

the degree to which wars are never only 'over there'; military violence overseas always informs and is informed by violences within US borders" (Darda 2015, 95).

After World War I, the medical community did not acknowledge the psychological and emotional state of homecoming military men as a mental disability. In fact, they coined a term for it, *shell-shock*, since doctors believed that these affections were the result of the soldiers' proximity to exploding shells. According to Jay Winter, "[t]he term [. . .] informed a language which contemporaries used to frame our sense of the war's scale, character, its haunting legacy" (2000, 7). Military officials "often labeled soldiers suffering from psychiatric symptoms as cowards lacking moral fiber" (Pols and Oak 2007, 2133). Shell-shocked veterans were accused of trying to shirk their military duty. In addition, people thought that shell-shock was a scam and regarded these soldiers as cowardly and weak, which led to them being alienated from their communities. Furthermore, men were considered capable of coping with psychological ailments due to their defining willpower and self-control. As veterans' mental problems were not recognized as an illness, there was no effective treatment.

During World War I, blacks may have suffered from shell-shock more than other soldiers, "the saga of the disabled African American veteran reveals the personal and lingering toll that the war took" (Keene 2005, 229). Frontline duty was not the only factor that triggered this mental disorder, there were several circumstances involved, for example, the lack of morale in the circus of war. Thus "African American soldiers, whose battalions were segregated from the rest of the armed forces, recorded a high incidence of psychiatric syndromes, which was most likely related to their low status and the discrimination they suffered in the army" (Dwyer 2006, 121). As Christopher De Santis points out, African American veterans were "treated with the same humiliating disrespect as their fellow black civilians. Jim Crow had infiltrated America's celebrated armies and the black soldiers who were fighting and dying for the freedom of people, black and white, back home were paying dearly for the intrusion: separate and less desirable living and eating quarters, little opportunity for advancement, and even segregated latrines—all made life for the African American soldier quite unbearable" (1995, 18). Moreover, many World War I black veterans did not receive disability allowance or health care in government hospitals when they needed it: "Since the war, some of the Southern crackers are using different means to keep we [*sic*] colored soldiers out of the hospitals and from getting vocational training. Their reasons for keeping us out of training is to rate us in compensation as low as possible" (quoted in Keene 2005, 236).<sup>4</sup>

Later during World War II and the Korean War, shell-shock was renamed *combat exhaustion* (no longer in scientific use), and it was not until the Vietnam War that PTSD was fully recognized.<sup>5</sup> The Korean War started to change the face of the American

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<sup>4</sup> *Cracker*, sometimes *white cracker* or *cracka*, is a usually disparaging term for white people, especially poor rural whites in the Southern US. Keene is quoting Joel Moore's words, a disabled veteran, in a 1924 letter to the NAACP (Association of the Advancement of Colored People).

<sup>5</sup> The name first appeared in 1980.

military, as black soldiers were able to serve in integrated units and were allowed to lead in combat.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the army thought that “unit cohesion” was a crucial factor in surviving this syndrome. In fact, in the initial phase of the Korean War, very high rates of neuropsychiatric casualties (250 per 1,000 per year) were reported due to “the nature of the conflict, characterized by quickly shifting front lines and widely dispersed battlefields,” which made it difficult to implement programs of forward psychiatry (Cameron and Owens 2004, 460). There were also rumors that “the army was using black troops as front-line shock troops” (Keene 2005, 229). Besides, many soldiers did not admit that they needed treatment to overcome their mental impairment, or felt they could not complain about their plight.

In *Home* and *Sula*, Morrison deals with traumatized veterans Frank and Shadrack, “disturbed prophets of peace [who] hold our gaze on the deranged center of war” (Grewal 1998, 57), who return home haunted by the horrors of war.<sup>7</sup> Frank is one of the main characters in the novel, whereas Shadrack is a relatively minor character with only a brief appearance, although he takes on more importance because of his symbolic role. As a matter of fact, the story starts and ends with him. The appalling things that these two soldiers endure psychologically shatter them both. Morrison brings to light how “the war continued for black veterans in more ways than one” (Keene 2005, 237) when they return.

In *Home*, Frank joins the army voluntarily with his two best friends, as they cannot stand their hometown Lotus, Georgia, “the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield” (Morrison [1973] 2012, 83).<sup>8</sup> Back from the Korean War, the only survivor of the trio, Frank “is set for another battlefield back in America, his ‘home’ country he has been fighting for” (Mitra 2014, n.p.), which Morrison wanted to demystify, as she explained in an interview:

Quiero descubrir una verdad sobre la vida cotidiana de Estados Unidos, la vida de los afroamericanos viviendo en un contexto histórico crítico que se ha ocultado. Existe la idea de que los años cincuenta eran como un cuento de hadas donde todos tenían trabajo, la sociedad iba bien, había programas de televisión con familias felices y una buena vida social y política. Ha proliferado la idea de unos años maravillosos, pero no era así. La verdad es que había luchas visibles y subterráneas. (Manrique Sabogal 2013, n.p.)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The integration of black and white troops in the armed forces was ordered by President Harry Truman immediately after the end of World War II, in 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Grewal is actually referring to Shadrack and Septimus Warren Smith, in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* ([1925] 1996).

<sup>8</sup> All references to the quotes from the novels by Toni Morrison, *Home* (Morrison [1973] 2012) and *Sula* (1973) will be made parenthetically in the text with the respective abbreviation *Home* and *Sula*.

<sup>9</sup> “I want to show the truth about the ordinary life in the United States, the life of African Americans living in a critical historical context, which has been concealed. People think that the 1950s were like a fairytale, a time when everybody had a job, the society was prospering, TV programs presented happy families and a pleasant social and political life. Those years have been regarded as “wonderful,” but they were not glorious years for everybody. There were actually visible and hidden struggles.” [My translation]

In *Sula*, Shadrack, barely twenty, is a World War I veteran from the Bottom, a mostly black community in Medallion, Ohio, who comes back from the war in France “[b]lasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917” (*Sula*, 7). Eileen Barrett says that, “in April 1917, more than a million Afro-American men like Shadrack responded to the Selective Service calls for volunteers [. . .] Shadrack might have assumed that valor in combat would be rewarded with opportunities at home” (1994, 2).<sup>10</sup>

Mentally ill African American veterans did not receive the appropriate medical care they needed when they returned from the war. Nor were they treated the same as their white counterparts when they were hospitalized. Jennifer Keene reports a case in the Marion Military Home, where supervisors kept black soldiers locked up while white patients were allowed to use the grounds freely (2005, 237). Berserk black veterans were just released even if they were still not ready to confront the world. In spite of their severe mental health disorders, Frank and Shadrack alike find themselves in an urban setting where they lack the social support network they really require. Shadrack, extremely disturbed, spends two years in a military hospital from which he is then discharged owing to lack of beds. As Melanie Anderson contends, he “was used in war, damaged, and set completely free with no assistance” (33). Despite his obsession to have everything under control, she continues, the Bottom veteran is “set adrift in a world that seems unpredictable and dangerous [. . .] he has neither family nor means to take care of whoever he is” (2013, 33). On leaving the hospital, he feels threatened by the potentially perilous outside world. Disoriented and overwhelmed by the grounds out of the hospital, the walks make him uneasy, inasmuch as anyone could “cut in another direction—a direction of one’s own” (*Sula*, 10). Shadrack is also extremely scared of the people around him, who he sees as paper figures that flex in the breeze. On the other hand, when Frank is discharged, he needs help, “but there wasn’t any. With no army orders to follow or complain about I ended up in the streets with none” (*Home*, 68). His thoughtful and kind discharge doctors send him home and tell him he will get better. They informed him that “the craziness would leave in time [. . .] assured him it would pass. Just stay away from alcohol, they said” (*Home*, 18).

Both Frank and Shadrack have a hard time adapting to their civilian lives. As a result of their acute mental disorder, they suffer from a constellation of symptoms, which causes them significant distress, and a deterioration in all aspects of their existence, making their lives impossible. Frank’s ordeal in Korea has “changed” him. Back home, he starts wandering and roaming the streets in his deranged state of mind, full of rage and self-loathing: “[w]ar memories, psychological injury, and loss have become a part of him” (Dudziak 2012, n.p.). As Tricia Springstubb writes, Frank “returns scarred inside and out. It’s not a Morrison story without ghosts, and here they take the form of soul-shaking flashbacks to the war’s horror” (2012, n.p.). The veteran has to confront

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<sup>10</sup> In the 1910s, discrimination against blacks in America was still quite strong. Many African Americans joined the army thinking that their service would be rewarded with civil rights reforms upon their return.

the gruesome recollections that torture him, the atrocities he has witnessed at war, such as his two best friends' deaths, but also his traumatic childhood remembrances. On occasions, harrowing intrusive memories take possession of him, as when a little girl with slanted eyes makes him bolt away like crazy.<sup>11</sup> His life is filled with episodes of insanity, like horrifying hallucinations and temporal color-blindness, “[a]ll color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen” (*Home*, 23). Nightmares ravage Frank’s dreams, such as that of a boy pushing his own entrails back inside his torn body, or the half-faced boy calling for his mama: “They never went away these pictures” (*Home*, 20). Dismemberment is also a recurrent theme in his war visions: “hallucinations of body parts which plague Frank” (Daniel 2012, n.p.), echoing African Americans’ history: “That order [of the New World], with its human sequence written in blood, represents for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of actual mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” (Spillers 1987, 67). In *Home*, through the dialogue between Frank and the narrator/scribe, Morrison poses the question of whether war and racism in all their monstrosity can be truly expressed through language: the possibility of narratively representing war ordeals “that [are] not yet fully owned” by the traumatized individual (Caruth 1995, 151). The damaged soldier criticizes the narrator’s ability to tell his traumatic experiences. When Frank’s family is expelled from their home in Texas, he exhorts the scribe: “*You can’t come up with words that can catch it (. . .) Describe that if you know how*” (*Home*, 41, italics in original). And yet, “[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (Herman 1997, 1).

Likewise, Shadrack has to cope with deeply distressing flashbacks of his first battle in France in 1917, like the one of a soldier whose head was blown off but he still kept running. When the Bottom veteran wakes up at the hospital, he is out of his mind with fear. Only the balanced triangles in the compartment food tray “reassured [him] that the white, the red and the brown would stay where they were—would not explode or burst forth from their restricted zones” (*Sula*, 8). In his dementia, Shadrack’s senses are especially sharp, even though “his memory is chaotic and full of holes” (Anderson 2013, 33). The madman seems to have successfully blocked out many of his excruciating memories, leaving him incapable of developing coping strategies. His early moments at the hospital are full with hallucinations of war, which he links to strong feelings of chaos. The unnerved veteran is terribly frightened by his own hands, whose fingers can “grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack’s beanstalk” (*Sula*, 9) or can fuse into “a permanent entanglement with his shoelaces” (13). Profoundly scared of possible dismemberment, Shadrack also feels greatly relieved when he sees that his hand is attached to his wrist.

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<sup>11</sup> Certain types of perceptions—colors, smells, objects, sounds—which generate intrusive painful recollections, are referred to as “triggers,” when they set off a recollection or acute episode of PTSD in this way.

In these novels, Morrison contrasts the nurturing black rural community, which appears as a true home in the face of violence, alienation and discrimination, symbolizing “the psychic support for the ‘self’ or subjectivity” (Schreiber 2010, 2), with the alienating and hostile urban society in which her characters live. Unable to return to Lotus, Frank stays in the city, abusing alcohol, maundering. Shadrack also suffers “irreparable harm in the outside, business-motivated, urban world” (House 1997, 102). In *Sula*, Plum, another World War I veteran, arrives home a year after he is discharged. About his post-war urban explorations, we only know that “there was obviously something wrong” (*Sula*, 45), since when he finally shows up in the Bottom, like Shadrack, he is permanently disabled. As Elizabeth House states, both Shadrack and Plum are names of a food (shad, a fish and plum, a fruit), albeit their “nurturing qualities, suggested by their names, are damaged by their experiences in the urban world [. . .] by losing contact with their community” (1997, 104).

It was really hard for returning soldiers to begin a new life. They had trouble making the transition back to civilian life, which was often related to serious injuries, service-connected disability or shell-shock. Actually, many veterans could not find a job after the war, the unemployment rate was often much higher than that of ordinary people, and a great number of them became homeless in a society that did not help them adjust to non-military life.<sup>12</sup> Even though many veterans were not activists, as Keene claims, after World War I, “struggles over veterans’ benefits served as a key milestone in the broader civil rights movement, turning veterans’ personal readjustment to civilian life into a collective racial struggle for social justice” (2015, 146). Neither Frank nor Shadrack can hold down a steady job. Even when Frank is settled with Lily, an Asian ambitious seamstress, he cannot easily get work and “regularly lost the few odd jobs he’d managed to secure” (*Home*, 21). The Bottom soldier, on the other hand, usually sells fish but, in winter, when the fish is harder to catch, he also does pick-up errands for small businesses, as “nobody would have him in or even near their homes” (*Sula*, 155). Veterans’ unemployment is commonly associated with self-destructive behavior, such as substance abuse. They generally have high rates of addiction, customarily associated with their unstable mental health. Alcohol and drugs aid them in keeping war ghosts at bay and blocking out emotional distress, even though in fact they just aggravate their already painful predicament. Only by consuming alcohol, can Shadrack and Frank forget their daunting war recollections.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Veterans were not hired due to their lack of civilian work experience. It was also difficult for them to obtain formal private sector recognition of their military training and they did not frequently comply with the complex licensing requirements of civilian life, even when they already had the required skills. Nor did many of them receive disability aid, which could have compensated them for their time in military service, and help them start again.

<sup>13</sup> In *Sula*, war indirectly destroys Plum, who becomes a drug addict. His mother, Eva Peace, who cannot bear his degradation, out of love, burns him alive.

The horrors of war, which metaphorically parallel the race war in America in the twentieth century, can change people so drastically that they may wonder who they are or detest who they have become. According to Nikhil Singh (2009): “Domestic racial violence not only reflects the conduct of this ‘experimental war’ [Korean War] in East Asia; they are in fact effects of the very same socioeconomic arrangement and bio-political logic” (quoted in Darda 2015, 98). Black veterans have severe identity issues connected to psychiatric disorder: despair, depression, shame, guilt, etc. As a result, traumatized soldiers, like victims of racism, develop very low self-esteem and self-worth. Their combat-related experiences and their behavior during their state of mental derangement problematize the creation of a positive self-image. In *Sula*, the Bottom madman . . .

didn't even know who or what he was [. . .] with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing nothing to do [. . .] he was sure of one thing only: the unchecked monstrosity of his hands. (*Sula*, 12)

Shadrack wants to tie-up the loose threads in his mind. He is extremely concerned about his identity. The veteran wonders why the people at the hospital call him “Private,” why they call him a secret. Gurleen Grewal points out that “[t]o call him Private is to hail the traumatic condition of Shadrack, the public insanity of war, as one of his own making” (1998, 56); Morrison thus emphasizes “the hiatus between the public and private” (Grewal 1998, 55). When the demented soldier is in jail (where the police, assuming that he is drunk, take him when they find him sitting next to the road after he had left the hospital), he tries desperately to find a way to see his own face. Its reflection in the toilet water, so definite and unequivocal, shocks him because “[h]e had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn't exist at all” (*Sula*, 13). In like manner, one morning, Frank is hardly able to recognize his own image in a store window. He has become the man in one of his dreams, a man alone on a battlefield, which prompts his decision to “[b]e something other than a haunted, half-crazy drunk” (*Home*, 69) and make his homeboys proud.

To the black soldiers' post-traumatic stress disorder, an exacerbating contextual risk factor is incorporated, the dominating white society, which both violates and denies the black self, compromising its ability to cope with extreme events. African Americans experience invisibility and self-hatred in their daily lives. The traumatized black veteran is the epitome of the already fragmented black individual. Frank's unspeakable remembrances stem from his childhood (we do not know, however, anything about Shadrack's life before war). Through the Korean veteran, Morrison discloses what being mentally ill was like for an African American man, as one who had felt since his infancy the burden of racial hate and discrimination. Childhood trauma can be devastating



and it can actually interfere with the construction of a healthy sense of self, affecting adversely the foundation of the personality. Frank's family, the Moneys, like other black households, were coerced into abandoning their home in Bandera County, Texas, by possibly the Ku Klux Klan. This disturbing episode of his life is etched on his memories: "You could be inside, living in our own house for years, and still, men with or without badges but always with guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes" (*Home*, 9). By means of her battle-scarred soldiers, Morrison brings to light the jarring conditions of African Americans' existence. After their expulsion, Frank's family is taken in by his paternal grandparents, who neglect and abuse him and his sister, Cee. Being only four, Frank is forced into adulthood when he has to adopt the role of surrogate parent and defend his sibling from their mean step-grandmother.

When envisaging the "mad veteran," Morrison focuses on the isolation and dislocation or estrangement of the black male individual. Traumatic experiences cause social withdrawal, which leads to loss of caring support and friendship. Disabled people feel too self-absorbed in their problems or emotionally numb. Both Shadrack and Frank Money's lives are overwhelmed by a sense of detachment. As Christopher Tietjens in *Some Do Not...* phrases it, "I'm not a whole man anymore [. . .] Alone, a broken man" (Madox Ford [1924] 2010, 202). As a result of their post-traumatic disorder, they have lost their confidence and self-love, which disengages and sunders them from society and even from their own people. In *Sula*, Morrison puts the spotlight on Shadrack's role in the black community. Back in the Bottom, the crazed veteran develops to become a strange, though harmless, resident, the "local madman," the ultimate example of the pariah, whose irreverent antics are harshly frowned upon: walking about with his penis out, cursing white people.<sup>14</sup> At first, his neighbors are afraid of him but, over the years, they realize that he is never violent with the people in the community. Despite his derangement, the Bottom veteran seems to understand what is going on more than people think. Shadrack's only real interaction with another human being occurs when Sula, a little girl at the time, runs to his cabin to find help the day Chicken Little drowns in the river. Sula, his first and only visitor, is really surprised at his unthreatening "sweet old cottage" and, ironically, it is his hands that eventually convince her that he is harmless: "no one with hands like that, no one with fingers that curved around wood so tenderly could kill her" (*Sula*, 62). From then on, Shadrack regards her as "a kindred alien spirit" (Byerman 1990, 68) as over her eye she has a birthmark in the shape of a tadpole, "the mark of the fish he loved" (*Sula*, 156). Morrison contrasts how Shadrack and Sula are two disparate kinds of pariahs, despite having their connection to evil in common: "Sula as (feminine) solubility and Shadrack's (male) fixative are two extreme ways of dealing with displacement" (Morrison 1990, 223). However, the people of the

<sup>14</sup> La Vinya Jennings highlights that "[o]utlaws of both African and European descents who have committed censurable moral evil, crimes that injure others, commonly live in Black neighborhoods as anonymous, undocumented social exiles in order to evade capture and (re-)incarceration" (2008, 7).

Bottom accept Shadrack, who is “contained insanity” (Harris 1991, 65), more readily than Sula: “once people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things” (*Home*, 15). He does not pose any threat to their identity or social system since, according to Morrison, people can make sense of his way of organizing chaos (Stepito 1994, 22). Cedric Bryant (1990) argues that the madman is less menacing inasmuch as he is “assigned a place in the community’s life” (quoted in Galehouse 1999, n.p.), whereas Sula, who rejects their social conventions, has no niche there.

Like Paul D in *Beloved* (Morrison 1987), in Frank’s healing cross-country odyssey, he meets different women whose affection and love, critical for his recuperation from traumatic experiences, help him not to succumb to complete insanity. Lily, his Asian lover, makes him “want to be good enough for her” (*Home*, 69) and “his attachment to her was medicinal [. . .] Lily displaced his disorder, his rage and his shame” (107). His nightmares stop and he can stay sober. Frank feels that he has finally come home. And yet, “neither drink nor Lily is enough to heal his [Frank’s] fractured sense of self” (Thomas 2012, n.p.). He is still haunted by the specter of war and, like other trauma victims, has difficulty conceiving of a future for himself, a symptom clinically referred to as a “sense of a foreshortened future” (Radcliffe, Ruddell and Smith 2014, n.p.). When Lily asks Frank what he wants to do with his life, he answers her, “[s]tay alive.” By the time the damaged veteran departs to rescue his sister from an unknown danger after receiving an anonymous letter saying “[c]ome fast. She be dead if you tarry” (*Sula*, 8), he has come to understand that love is not enough.

Trauma-related guilt, which erodes self-esteem and creates feelings of ignominy, is the gist of the traumatized individual’s madness. Frank has to confront his distressing childhood memories, terrifying war recollections, survivor guilt and moral injury. Frank still blames himself for his friends’ deaths, and does not want to go back to Georgia without them: He “was far too alive to stand before Mike’s folks or Stuff’s. His easy breath and unscathed self would be an insult to them. And whatever lie he cooked up about how bravely they died, he could not blame their [families’] resentment” (*Home*, 15). Frank also suffers from ‘moral injury,’ “an act of serious transgression that leads to serious inner conflict because the experience is at odds with core ethical and moral beliefs” (Maguen and Litz 2012, n.p.). Soldiers lose their humanity in abominable military acts. Through the Korean veteran, Morrison depicts how “the conflict that came on the heel of the war that produced ‘the Greatest Generation’ was anything but a glorious affair” (Yarbrough 2012, n.p.). A ghastly wartime episode preys upon Frank’s mind. Out of shame at being aroused, he shoots a scavenging Korean girl, who resembles his sister. The crazed veteran must tackle his self-blame and remorse at his actions, and his “pedophilic” sentiments, which he has been denying and disguising as righteous mourning upon his friends’ deaths. The shattering of the black male soldier’s identity is even more frightful in his role as a victimizer.

In *Sula* and *Home*, death is at the core of Shadrack's and Frank's traumatic disorders and, thus, powerfully connected to the broken veteran's disabilities, especially their "having been an agent of killing and having been a failure at preventing death and injury" (Maguen and Litz 2012, n.p.). As Maggie Galehouse claims, both Frank and Shadrack are first-hand witnesses of death and, as a consequence of their dreadful and poignant trials and tribulations, "both face their mortality and the precarious construction of the self in direct, disturbing ways" (1999, n.p.). Frank knew death. Ever since his discharge, he has been haunted by the demise of his friends and the Korean girl. Until the point where his homeys die, Frank has only killed when necessary, but after this point he shifts into a "brave," reckless military man, and "[t]here were not enough dead gooks or Chinks in the world to satisfy him" (*Home*, 98). *Sula* also "evokes death at many levels" (Grewal 1998, 45). Shadrack not only knows death but, what is more, is able to foresee it. When Sula comes to his house, the madman looks at her and he can see the skull beneath, an omen of her early demise. Then, thinking that Sula has seen it too, he has seen it too, Shadrack tries to comfort her. He says to her "always," "so she would not have to be afraid of the change—the falling away of skin, the drip and slide of blood, and the exposure of bone underneath [. . .] to convince her, assure her, of permanency" (*Sula*, 157). Due to his experiences in war, Shadrack is terrified of the unexpectedness and suddenness of death and dying. In an attempt to gain some control over his feelings, he institutes a new holiday on January 3, "National Suicide Day": a "therapeutic ritual of action" meant "to assuage the psychic shock of death's uncertainty that first traumatizes him on the battlefield in France" (Jennings 2008, 150). The third day of every new year, he marches along the streets of the community ringing a cowbell and carrying a hangman's rope. Only on that day, the veteran tells the Bottom's residents they can kill themselves or each other. Shadrack wants to give other people the chance to choose the time of their death so they are not taken by surprise, a ritualistic role that provides him with the life purpose he has been seeking.<sup>15</sup> Every year from 1920 onwards, Shadrack marches through the Bottom declaring that people should commit suicide or kill each other in a procession which "derides military parades" (Barrett 1994, 4).<sup>16</sup> At the outset, the celebration causes panic and, for a long time, it is viewed as simply "Shadrack's annual solitary parade" (*Sula*, 15). Nonetheless, over time, it evolves into a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom and, unsurprisingly, the other pariahs of Medallion—Tar

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<sup>15</sup> As Gay Willentz writes, Shadrack exhibits what in the beliefs of some traditional religions is the often eccentric behavior of the priests (1997, 129). Lewis Vashti thinks that, in traditional West African culture, a person who has lain unconscious enters the spirit world of his ancestors, acquiring a divine nature. Thus, the insane veteran becomes a West African water priest or a divine river spirit for displaced African people in the Bottom (1987, 92).

<sup>16</sup> Eileen Barrett also believes that the madman's parade "challenges the prevalence of lynchings [and] commemorates, in its way, the 1917 anti-lynching demonstration, when more than 5,000 marchers walked silently through the streets of New York under a banner that read simply, 'Your Hands are Full of Blood'" (1994, 4).

Baby, a white alcoholic, and the Deweys, three boys who Sula's grandmother take in—are the first to join the madman. Ironically, Reverend Deal, a minister of the Bottom, tells those who sensibly avoid the insane soldier's call that they would do better to join him than drinking or womanizing themselves to death.

Shadrack's ritualistic role is linked to the death of the black community in the Bottom, which started as a white man's joke, the bottom of heaven. At the end of the novel, after Sula's death, for the first time the crazed soldier no longer cares whether he can help other people or not. He has to force himself to go to the march which he himself has instigated and, even though normally no one joins him, this year, most of the townspeople accompany him. The excitement grows and the procession, gathering steam behind the lunatic man, heads towards the incomplete tunnel which the blacks of the Bottom thought they would be hired to work on, but were finally not allowed to build. The community's concealed frustrations and despair emerge stronger than ever at the sight of the unfinished construction, symbol of their economic penuries and their true oppressors. The spite that "galloped all over the Bottom" (*Sula*, 171) springs up and the mob's frantic destruction results in the collapse of the tunnel, which kills many. Ironically, Shadrack has metamorphosed into a Pied Piper, who eventually lures his town folks into their own death parade. In the end, the Bottom soldier, high up on the bank ringing his bell, seems to be one of the most judicious characters of the narrative, heralding the deceitfulness of the world they live in: "'National Suicide Day' finally becomes the communally celebrated 'rational' solution to absurdity he had originally devised, precisely because of a collective release of 'black rage,' a collective (and self-destructive) reaction to historical disorder" (Grant 1988, 94). Hence, in the 1941 procession which closes the novel, catalyst as well as a closure element for the Bottom, "Shadrack is able to get the citizens of the Bottom [. . .] to a wet smothering grave, they simultaneously give meaning to his ritual and signal the death of their community" (Harris 1991, 83-84).

In *Home*, Frank's voyage from trauma to self-discovery cannot come to an end until he regains his lost sense of purpose. When he receives the anonymous letter about his sister, he realizes he could not stand one more death. The Korean veteran has to get back home and rescue her. He surmises that his life might have been preserved, since Cee is the best part of him: "Down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself—a strong good me" (*Home*, 104). The siblings' destinies are intertwined. Saving his sister is to save himself. As David Ulin aptly states, Cee is "the one person about whom he cares, the beacon that pulls him onward, the lodestar for the journey, both interior and exterior" (2012, n.p.). Only through his sibling can Frank improve his self-esteem, reconnect with his community and acquire a sense of direction and achievement. Morrison uses Frank's quest to show us that, as for many ordinary blacks, it was the struggle with racism and exclusion which often shaped the lives of African American soldiers. After the war, "[t]heir fight seems far from over" (Knauer 2014, 230). Against the backdrop of the pre-civil rights era, Morrison unveils a mid-twentieth-

century America filled with racial prejudice, where blacks customarily underwent many distressful and violent situations, as when, in the novel, an African American man is beaten at a coffeehouse for daring to order coffee or the black boy shot by a policeman. Traumatized war veterans also withstand the cultural displacement and social discrimination that characterize postcolonial American society, "integrated as soldiers but segregated as civilians" (Darda 2015, 102). As Reverend Locke, who first gives Frank shelter at Mount Zion church, tells him: "You [black soldiers who serve in an integrated army] all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better" (*Home*, 18). And yet, some good Samaritans, such as Reverend Locke or Billy Watson, another veteran, "remnants of an underground railroad of kindness" (Charles 2012, n.p.), generously offer Frank help and hospitality.

Reverend Locke warns Frank, who has served in a desegregated army, about the racism he is going to encounter up North: "maybe you think up North is way different from down South. Don't believe it and don't count on it. Custom is just as real as law and can be just as dangerous" (*Home*, 19). Morrison exposes how, in the 1950s as in the 1920s, America is not still a safe place for African Americans. On the contrary, they are victims of severe violence. Along Frank's travels, we see blacks under the threat of attack by the Klu Klux Klan, lynching and persecution, a man beaten at a coffeehouse, and this violence reaches into the very private sphere of the African American home with Frank's family's expulsion. Frank knows that when you are black, it does not matter if you are outside or inside "for legal or illegal disruption" (*Home*, 9). War-traumatized African American soldiers were treated as "criminals." In fact, Locke wonders why the police do not take Frank to jail rather than hospital. Ludicrously, he can only think that they might believe the veteran is dangerous because "[i]f you was just sick they'd never let you in" (*Home*, 13). Furthermore, when Frank and a friend are subjected to a random search, they are disdainfully released once one of the police officers notices Frank's medal, symbol of his honorable service to his country. At this time in America, walking without "purposeness" could lead to detention and an accusation of vagrancy or loitering. In *Sula*, Shadrack is arrested for vagrancy and intoxication when, having been peremptorily discharged from the hospital, he feels dizzy and stumbles, as though he were drunk.

Frank's trip back home to rescue Cee epitomizes the redemption quest of the shattered black self. The broken veteran begins the reshaping of his identity and a healing reconciliation with the past: "For Frank, though, the healing isn't easy. He must confront his demons—secrets about the war's brutalities that he hasn't been able to acknowledge. His manhood and his sanity are at stake until he does" (Thomas 2012, n.p.). He leaves behind his crippling apathy, recovering his sense of mission and hopes for a better future. His selfless love for his sister and sense of responsibility toward hers help him focus on his rescuing mission, and travelling allows him to cope with his haunting memories. Eventually, Frank shows signs of recovery. He realizes that his harrowing recollections "did not crush him anymore or throw him into paralyzing

despair" (*Home*, 100) and that he may have many sad memories, "but no ghosts or nightmares for two days" (106). To set his sister free, Frank successfully defies the evil white doctor, Dr. Beauregard Scott, for whom his sister is working as an assistant and who has been performing eugenic experiments on her without consent. Frank just walks into the office of the doctor, who at the sight of a black man, immediately mistakes him for a thief and threatens him with a gun. Frank takes his sister and walks out with her calmly and without violence. By exhibiting a heroic behavior in the face of the physician's cowardice, he retrieves his manliness and dignity, and breaks with the Western stereotype of the black man as a beast. His non-violent actions make him feel proud for the first time in a long time. Nonetheless, even though Frank "succeeds in rescuing his sister and quieting many of his own demons by the end of the journey, it is much more difficult to argue that the cultural and racial traumas that he bears are fully healed" (Ibarrola 2014, 111).

In *Lotus*, when Cee tells him that she cannot have a baby, Frank can finally cry, which he has not done since he was a child, not even when his friend Mike died in his arms. In the end, the unnerved soldier can acknowledge pain, while his feelings are hopeful: "there were worthwhile things that needed doing" (*Home*, 135). His final redemptive act takes place in his hometown when brother and sister together tackle an appalling episode of their infancy, when they witnessed a burial and were terrified. However, it is not until the siblings are piecing together their fragmented selves that they start wondering what happened back then. They learn from their grandfather Salem that whites organized "men-treated-like-dog fights" (*Home*, 138) to the death between black individuals. The corpse buried belonged to a father killed by his own son, who was fighting to save his own life. The iniquity of these fights and the consequent animalization and dehumanization of black men in a white racist society are paralleled and contrasted with the opening image of two stallions fighting and standing "like men" (*Home*, 3), a childhood memory full of dignity and violence.<sup>17</sup> Brother and sister celebrate a ritual for the dead black male, whose bones are arranged inside a quilt Cee has made which is then put under a sweet bay tree with a wooden marker, which reads "Here Stand A Man." In this ceremony, Frank and Cee bestow the stolen dignity and humanity on that anonymous black man, thus regaining theirs. The ritual symbolism of the quilt (identity reconstruction) and that of trees (ancestry, life and death) are thus combined. Ergo, Morrison suggests the self-construction process, along with the need to pay homage to ancestors. Besides, in this cyclic return to the beginning, she hints at the connection between scarring memories and the present in the postcolonial period, as well as intimates the need to lay the haunting ghosts of the past—slavery and its legacy—to rest before a better future can be built. As Morrison contends, "[t]he best defense against the destructiveness of racism

<sup>17</sup> According to Vega González, horses as "symbols of power, strength and masculinity [. . .] which are in turn related to war [. . .] prefigure the setting of the Korean War Frank will be involved in" (2013, 214).

[. . .] is the formation of a cultural identity derived from an understanding of history” (Wall 2005, 6), and reconciliation with a harrowing past.

We cannot expect recovery from Shadrack, since his deranged condition seems permanent. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, the crazy veteran undergoes some changes in behavior. Sula's demise affects him deeply. When the enervated man sees her dead, he thinks: “Another dying away of someone whose face he knew” (*Sula*, 158). He finally understands that he cannot control life or death: “Suicide Day has not warded off death and disorder” (House 1997, 102). The Bottom soldier, “still energetically mad” (*Sula*, 173), realizes how the voices are less and less with him, the drunken times are deeper but less frequent and his war remembrances are fading, “it was harder and harder to conjure up sergeants, and orderlies, and invading armies, harder and harder to hear the gunfire and keep the platoon marching in time” (*Sula*, 156). In our last image of the veteran, ironically, Shadrack, “the ritual healer associated with the river and fish as a symbol of regeneration” (Grewal 1998, 58), is brooding over how the river has killed all the fish.<sup>18</sup> This extinction goes hand in hand with the annihilation of the Bottom, which “becomes a golf course—a sacrifice to urban renewal” (Barrett 1994, 4). Not only can Shadrack's transformation not be seen as a recovery, but also his ritualistic role brings about the sacrifice of the black community to the oppression of a racist white-dominated society: “*Sula* expresses the long and slow death of hope in a black community, the trials of black women and black men who fought the war and suffered its disorder ever after” (Grewal 1998, 58).

Both *Home* and *Sula* unearth the atrocious impact of war on the human mind. Traumatized black veterans endured acute symptoms such as nightmares, hallucinations, distress, etc., and also their consequences, substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment, etc., which impaired their daily lives. Shell-shocked soldiers are the ultimate example of the fractured black self in relation to its own community and society in general. In Morrison's novels, war-related trauma can only be understood within a broader meaning of trauma linked to racism and its history in America. The psychological aspect of deranged traumatized soldiers must be read within the historical and social contexts in which they lived, the violence, discrimination, prejudice and injustices blacks had to bear on a regular basis. Morrison also shows us the intricacies of these veterans' journeys of healing and redemption. After they were terribly damaged by war, the American government and society did not provide appropriate treatment or the necessary support services for veterans, who ended up isolated and cast away, suffering the violence and racism of postcolonial America. From their marginalized position, these crazed black soldiers had to reestablish the broken bonds with their communities and reconstruct their identities, recovering their lost self-confidence and self-worth.

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<sup>18</sup> Grewal is comparing him to the wounded Fisher King in *The Waste Land*.

In *Sula*, but especially in *Home*, the concepts of alienation or orphanhood, identity, home and race are tangled together. Uprooted black veterans try to find a home, “a space of security and comfort lodged in memory [. . .] embedded in the unconscious” (Schreiber 2010, 160), in the rural black community that embodies their collective memory, while society at large fails them. Frank and Shadrack alike become, as Trudier Harris argues with respect to Frank, “the epitome of the community penchant for survival” (1991, 61). They incarnate the African American damaged veteran’s modes of resilience and strategies to cope with trauma, which metaphorically symbolizes the black community’s struggle to survive in the face of racial discrimination and oppression. Morrison unveils how many black people can overcome devastating tribulations, such as war, even though the emotional distress experienced leaves a lasting imprint upon them. However, some of them remain forever disabled. These broken soldiers exemplify the difficulties of healing the wounds of slavery and, as Sam Durrant (2004) asserts, “the impossibility of ever fully coming to terms with the history of racism” (quoted in Ibarrola 2014, 122). Through her anti-heroic psychologically distraught veterans, Morrison “ha[s] looked beyond and before the war on terror to trace a longer history of permanent war in the United States” (Darda 2015, 101-102).

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