

Tough Love and a Tougher Life

Cover Letter to the Second Draft

The bulk of the revisions was spent on two tasks: covering logical gaps and extracting more information from quotes.

The former involved a lot of work with transitions. For example, the list on pages 4/5 (that you marked unclear) had to be prefixed with a simple declaration of the list's contents, and a brief explanation of how it ties into the claim. I tried to make very clear the direct relationship between being in a loving family and having the confidence to fight your own fights (as was in Helene's case), and vice versa (as was in Hannah's case); there was a little clarification on the difference between the modern (materialistic) and ancient (unconditional) definitions of love and which one Eva represented; and what it means to live a "normal" life. In the first draft, these ideas were all mentioned but never explicitly addressed, and I think having a little more precision in these definitions is important for my claim (because if they were more ambiguous, the claim would be less interesting).

I also tried to clarify the counter-argument that is near the end (that "tough love" can be beneficial, but not in small family units or for extended periods of time). I'm not sure if it is very clear that it is a counter-argument, or why it is important; it could use a little more revision if I had more time.

Lastly, I edited some of the quote interpretations. I added one quote and kept all of the ones previously embedded, but I was trying to make the significance of each more clear (especially the one about Helene's strong will and Sula's lack of pride).

Jonathan Lam

Jonathan Lam

Professor Germano

HSS1B

10 December 2018

Tough Love and a Tougher Life

“Mamma, did you ever love us?” ...

“No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’.”

(Morrison 67)

The answer should be simple. But for Eva Peace to her daughter Hannah, it’s not so.

Minutes later, Eva jumps out of the third-story window at Hannah to save her life. But Hannah dies, dancing, twitching in flames, and in the last conversation she ever has her mother tells her she was not loved.

The question is loaded. What does it mean to love? In poorer communities of developing nations, love is something to be expected from family, and the basic parental functions of feeding, clothing, and sheltering are accepted as loving actions. But in the modern world, or even in the early twentieth century United States, the connotation of family love has changed dramatically: the stereotypical image is of a large family huddled around a central Christmas tree opening gifts with big grins on their faces or a birthday celebration at a fancy restaurant. The simpler idea of love is not as easily accepted: people want some kind of acknowledgement of love. In the dialogue from Toni Morrison’s novel *Sula*, Hannah asks her mother with the newer sense of the term in mind: she wonders if Eva ever played with or pampered her children. Eva reprimands her, saying that having them survive was enough. Eva doesn’t feel that she has been

unfair to her children. The two connotations of familial love conflict in the Peace family as Eva tries to get by with a purely survival notion, but her children have an appetite for material love; the result is that her children feel unwanted and actually pass away sooner because of the lack of tender love, contradicting her original goal to have her family persist.

Consider the Wright family. While Helene was abandoned by her parents at a young age, a childhood with her loving grandmother led her to grow up strong and proud. Helene is described as a woman who “lost only one battle—the pronunciation of her name” (18)—being raised with care allows her to live with the goal of raising a family that would *not* abandon its children. Her grandmother’s example gives her the confidence to fight “battles” for her own sake, such as when she endured mens’ glares after smiling at a white conductor.

Harmonious relationships prosper in the Wright family: Helene lives with her grandmother for a long time, and she herself stays in a loyal marriage with Wiley, despite his often being away. While Nel feels uncomfortable following the strict rules of her parents, she understands that it is for the best—she understands that she has to be as strong as her mother. Then Nel leads a comfortable relationship with Jude for a decade with three children. The example and image of stability begets another generation of stability.

The Peace family, on the other hand, lives pragmatically. Eva heads the household: everything else is a result of her doing. The three Deweys, for instance, are referred to by her collectively because of the similarity of their attitudes, and they indeed become a single practical entity. There was plenty of space in the house for Eva to live on the third floor on her managerial wheelchair, for newlyweds and drug addicts to rent rooms, and for Hannah to have

affairs in the pantry. The tangled house with additions built over the years exemplifies the behavior of the home: changes are made as necessary to accommodate the types of visitors the house might serve, much as the family absorbs different kinds of troubles. There's a lot of physical material there, a lot that Eva has shaped for her family to grow up around. But this is not the same as a parent consciously, deliberately buying an apartment and presenting it as a gift for their child. Rather, it's part of Eva's spontaneous personality to provide for her children's survival, without asking if her children wanted it or desiring for anything in return. Unfortunately, to her children, these acts simply doesn't seem like love, and in the mess nor does it seem responsible.

After asking if Eva loves her, Hannah asks why Eva kills Plum— the answer is that Plum's life was wasting away, and that death was the quicker and more merciful end. It is possible that Hannah's subsequent fiery death was a coincidence, but it is more likely that grief or shock at Eva's apathy was the culprit.

To Eva, these two statements— not loving her children in the traditional way, and killing Plum— are attempts to save her children from worse deaths. She was willing to amputate her leg for money; she puts her body in mortal risk again to try to save Hannah from her untimely death. It is more difficult to justify burning Plum directly. He sees Eva as “the great wing of an eagle” (47) to release him from his misery, and perhaps the validity of her claim can be seen; but to the more empathic, such as Hannah, death is no rescue, and Eva pitilessly misguidedly murders based on the unimportant, material fact that Plum is a heroin addict who steals money.

The problem is that Eva attempts to save her children from a past reality. She was left to raise three children with no money and no supporting husband, so her life was focused on plain survival and monetary success. At her nadir, all she had was “\$1.65, five eggs, three beets, and no idea of what or how to feel. The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life” (32). If Eva’s greatest ambitions could be summarized, it was to get as far as possible from encountering that lowly situation again. So she ran her leg over with a train for insurance money. She used the last of the lard to save Plum. She built a house and rented out rooms to make money. She became extremely efficient in order to survive and to make money. Just like Helene Wright wanted to let her children live in a loving household because of her abandonment, Eva Peace set her life on creating an environment where her children did not have to worry about basic survival nor about lacking money to live stably. But even after the children grow up, Eva directs the household mechanically, not displaying any affection for her children.

What does this mean for her family? How does it feel to be fed by a robot? Eva may have kept all of her children alive until adulthood, but then what? They don’t know how to take care of children, because they haven’t been loved (in the traditional way) for their whole life. And when they become adults and move on with their lives after being brought up by Eva, life is not what they were taught to expect. Hannah and Plum continue to live with Eva, and their lives parallel that of their mother. Sula, the only mentioned grandchild of Eva, also begins to inherit some of these traits from her mother. The characteristics of Eva’s narrow-minded will to survive become intergenerational:

1. Eva never held a long relationship; in fact, she had a child with only one person. Hannah only held a child with Rekus, and only flitting relationships with other men, as does Sula. Plum never had a relationship due to his drug addiction.
2. It can be inferred Hannah doesn't spend much of her time with Sula (as she spends much of her time with men), much the same way Eva didn't spend much taking care of her children. Sula and Plum do not spend time with children because they do not have any.
3. Eva had her leg run over by a train and collects rent in order to make money. There is no mention of how Hannah makes money in the novel. Plum is also known to steal money with which to buy heroin, and does not have a source of income.

The simple diagnosis is bad parenting passed down from mother to child. The only success was to keep their children alive to adulthood, the initial cause Eva's pragmatic-ness, but it was inherited. Plum, Pearl, and Hannah all have Eva's discipline but none of her plights: they are hardy enough to survive famine or lack of shelter, but incapable of what may be considered "ordinary living": properly caring for children, having a respectable paying job, and taking care of their own bodies. With the lack of confidence in ordinary activities, Plum, Hannah, and Sula all have a low self respect. For the faults that stem from Eva's single-minded focus to survive, there is only a contradictory weaker will to live.

By the end of the novel, Sula comes to the realization that "I like my own dirt ... I'm not proud" (142). With a steady job and children to take care of, Nel is a proud and independent woman, but Sula feels that her life is as important as dirt, and she falls ill as she gets sick and disillusioned with her unstable lifestyle.

It's not to say that tough love and practicality are completely unnecessary in harsh conditions. After all, in times of extended hardship in a community, the suffering is communal and society works to help each other out. It doesn't matter if it is "floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine, [or] ignorance" (90) or later, Sula's promiscuity, as the people of Medallion are known to endure; everyone works together and strong friendships are forged. In the small family unit, however, the stress may be too great. Eva survived a period of crisis when she was left with nothing, but the way she continued to live in crisis-mode wore down on the family. Just like physical overexertion or a mental breakdown, living constantly practically, without the niceties and gestures of "material love," can become disastrous.

In the end, Eva is the only Peace left in the peace-less family after the death of her children and Sula. She survived, and trained her children to survive— but at what cost?

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: New American Library, 1987. Print.