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**“ ‘Let Evil Run its Course’: Rivalry, Scapegoating and Conversion in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”
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My paper for this colloquium is a reading of a contemporary classic of American literature, Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel *Sula* and the way this text employs the ‘Girardian’ themes of triangular desire, conflictual mimesis, the wearing out of the surrogate victim mechanism and the ensuing sacrificial crisis, as well as the question of a ‘novelistic conclusion’ as a narrative occasion for coming to terms with and recognizing the rivalry underlying the inter-personal relationships of the story.

The paper consists of three parts. The first deals with the scapegoating motif in *Sula* and how this motif can be clarified and enriched by Girard’s concept of the sacrificial crisis. The second part focuses on the single victim status of the novel’s eponymous character. The third part of the paper finally elaborates on the conversion motif of Morrison’s novel and how it relates to its central story of friendship and rivalry between the characters Sula and Nel and Nel’s personal transformation through her recognition of the mimetic laws of her community and her own psyche.

1. Scapegoating and the Sacrificial Crisis in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*

Scapegoating is a frequent theme in several Toni Morrison’s novels (see e.g. Goulimari 2006), but a consistently Girardian reading of *Sula* (1973) goes a long way to demonstrate not only the imminent fact of the surrogate victimage motif, but also its dimensions of person-to-person rivalry and the collective escalation of uncontrollable violence, respectively.¹ At the heart of the novel’s narrative dynamic is the one on one interaction between former childhood friends Sula Peace and Nel Wright (later Greene through marriage), and it is this relationship, a friendship revealed as rivalry, that is both analogous with and contrasted to the collective storyline of sacrifice and eventual sacrificial crisis. In the end of the novel Nel gains insight into the hidden machinations of the scapegoating mechanism working against Sula and realizes the arbitrary character of her friend’s ostracisement by the black community of the town of Medallion (see also Goulimari 2006, 200). Moreover, Nel learns to see her own sacrificial guilt in connection to her and Sula’s accidental killing of a small

¹ In her article “Something Else to Be: Singularities and Scapegoating Logics in Toni Morrison’s Early Novels” (*Angelaki Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, vol. II, number 2, August 2006, pp. 191-204), Pelagia Goulimari employs, somewhat critically, Girard’s theory of sacrifice to Morrison’s works. However, she does not explicitly explore the aspect of the sacrificial crisis and pays very little attention to mimetic rivalry as the instigator of the surrogate victim mechanism.

boy, Chicken Little, when they were twelve-year-olds. This secret partnership in crime has a scapegoating undercurrent of its own and it cements the bond between the two friends until their falling-out in adulthood over Sula's affair with Nel's husband Jude. Though still not actively taking part in the symbolic and verbal scapegoating of Sula by her neighbourhood, Nel comes to share their beliefs in Sula's evil nature. In the end of the novel, when Sula has been dead for twenty-five years, Nel's meeting with Sula's estranged grandmother Eva Peace forces her to confront her hypocrisy concerning her cherished martyrdom and having made Sula shoulder alone the guilt over Chicken Little's drowning.

Contrasted to Nel's eventual conversion consisting in the recognition of her own scapegoating tendencies is the collective annihilation facing many of the residents of Medallion's black community (or "the Bottom", as it is colloquially called) after they storm the white-owned construction site that promised but failed to deliver employment for black men. The carnevalistic frenzy with which the Bottomers attack the tunnel that is being dug on the site spells the end of the communally contained (and in this case, symbolic and non-physical) violence to which Sula had been subjected while she lived. Thus, after the loss of their scapegoat, the Bottom turns against its real social and historical antagonist, namely the white capitalist establishment. But although Morrison's critique of the oppressive and racist status quo of early 1940's Ohio (not to mention the rest of the USA) is scathing and poignant, she does not romanticize the violent revolt of the oppressed. On the contrary, the text follows the logic of cathartic violence to its inevitable conclusion, where the archaic hypocrisy of the single victim mechanism has given way to the more honest but all-consuming reciprocity of answering a blow with another blow. The assault on the tunnel leads precisely to the escalation of mimetic violence that the community's sacrificial turning on Sula sought to pre-empt:

Old and young, women and children, lame and hearty, they killed, as best they could, the tunnel they were forbidden to build.

They didn't mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far...

A lot of them died there. The earth, now warm, shifted; the first forepole slipped; loose rock fell from the face of the tunnel and caused a shield to give way. They found themselves in a chamber of water, deprived of the sun that had brought them there. (*S*, 161-162)

The luminous ecstasy of unanimous violence ("the sun that had brought them there") ends in "a chamber of water", a whirlpool of undifferentiated destruction on a seemingly eschatological scale.

What precedes this communal apocalypse - notice, that even though the white construction site is attacked, the only casualties are the blacks themselves - is a more archaic and “tribal” form of sacrificial violence still contained within its ritualistic restraints and targeted against a single victim, namely Sula. It is Sula’s death (from natural causes) that deprives the Bottom of its cathartic outlet, resulting in a crisis that is symptomatic of the Judeo-Christian / secular modernity (as opposed to mythological religiosity) of the culture at large. It is only in the year following Sula’s death that Bottomers celebrate the “National Suicide Day”, an annual tradition founded by the village idiot Shadrack, a shell-shocked veteran of World War I. Until that moment Shadrack has been the only participant of his own feast that he instigated as a form of therapy for his gnawing fear of death and offered in vain to share with the others:

On the third day of the new year, he walked through the Bottom down Carpenter’s road with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other.

At first the people in the town were frightened; they knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn’t have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power. [...].

As time went along, the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather they thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack’s annual solitary parade. In fact they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives. (*S*, 14-15)

A self-made high priest, Shadrack tries to whip people up into a sacrificial frenzy, albeit one carnivalistically contained in a single “holiday”. It is noteworthy that even though Shadrack has named the carnival as one of suicide, he also encourages people to kill each other. This seeming contradiction is a further implication of Morrison’s insight into the reciprocal nature of violence, one that becomes evident during the National Suicide Day of 1941 when the villagers for the first - and ironically, also the last - time follow Shadrack’s lead by parading with him and finally making their way to the tunnel where many of them are annihilated. Like Dionysus of Euripides’s *The Bacchae* or the Pied Piper of Hamelin in the eponymous fairy-tale, Shadrack drives his cultic followers to destruction while he himself escapes unscathed (at least, in a strictly physical sense; *S*, 162) – much like his namesake, Shadrach, who walked through fire in *The Book of Daniel*. But the tunnel disaster should not be interpreted as a crime engineered by Shadrack or a conscious act of mass suicide by the Bottomers, but rather as the logical culmination of a sacrificial crisis, a meltdown of the scapegoating mechanism and the inevitable failure to ward off reciprocal violence. But before dealing with sacrificial crisis, let us first explore the workings of the single victim mechanism in Morrison’s novel and the role Sula’s character plays in it.

2. The Single Victim Mechanism in *Sula*

To interpret Morrison's *Sula* through Girard's mimetic theory is to universalize those aspects of the novel's characterization, setting and plotting that seem to call for an emphasis on the particular, if not the singular. These include, most importantly, the race and gender of the African-American female protagonists Sula and Nel, as well as the historicity of the story that spans from the late 19th century to the mid-1960's, covering, among other things, the First World War, the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the coming of age of the Civil Rights Movement. But universalization does not necessarily amount to trivialization. On the contrary, what Girard calls a "fundamental anthropology" may be just the thing needed to prevent Morrison's work from being reduced to its ethnic, historical and gender particulars, while still recognizing their invaluable role in the whole that transcends them.

The titular character of *Sula* is a member of her society, a black woman among other black women in an all-black neighbourhood of a racially segregated small town. However, for reasons that are far from self-evident, she becomes that society's scapegoat. True, her gender makes her vulnerable, since it is often implied by the omniscient narrator that the sexual transgressions of women are more severely frowned upon than those of men (the alfa male Ajax is given free rein to cause violent rivalry among the many women he beds as a matter of course; *S*, 125; also, black men are allowed to desire white women, whereas a black woman voluntarily sleeping with a white man is deemed guilty of the one sin that apparently can never be forgiven; *S*, 112-113). But even the loose morals of other women are *a posteriori* tolerated to a great extent without their risking being ostracized from the community. This is equally true for Sula's late mother Hannah who was unapologetically adulterous (though in an endearing way that seemed to flatter the philandering husbands and their betrayed wives alike; *S*, 115) and China, the most notorious of the local prostitutes who has had a child by a white man (*S*, 172). Moreover, the two eccentric matriarchs with textbook qualifications for falling prey to patriarchal witch-hunts, Eva Peace and Ajax's "evil conjure woman" mother, are not only spared abuse but are considered valuable contributors to Bottom society.

So if it is not Sula's sexual behaviour and transgression of gender roles that brand her as a pariah, could it be her ethnic identity? Race is a volatile issue in the segregated society of the fictional but all too realistic city of Medallion, Ohio, where the lighter shades of dark skin are viewed with hostile suspicion by the "pitch-black truebloods" of the Bottom (*S*, 52). Still, it is not the "heavy brown" Sula who borders on being branded as a despised mulatto, but Nel whose skin is "the color of wet sand paper" (*S*, 52) and whose mother Helene Wright has notions of making her

daughter appear whiter than she is (by straightening her hair with a comb and narrowing her nose with a clothespin). Sula has a distinguishing physical characteristic, though, a birthmark near her eye the shape of a stemmed rose, but this is not a racial feature.

Although Morrison's tendency to emphasize the racial and gender singularities of her heroines has been underlined by theorists (among others Ledbetter 1993 and Goulimari 2006), it seems that there is nothing particularly singular in Sula's character in the novel's actual textual world, the case against her being one of projection. It is true that racial and sexual tensions are essential motives behind Sula's scapegoating by Bottomers. But, it could be argued, the social dynamic of instigating and maintaining the surrogate victim mechanism parallels those of other societies regardless of their ethnic make-up and gender bias.

The singling out of Sula as surrogate victim against whom the Bottom can direct its various anxieties (i.e. family tensions, sexual conflicts, racial inferiority complexes, lack of social status and self-esteem, poverty, illness, unemployment), is motivated by her somewhat exceptional bond with her environment; she is an insider and an outsider at the same time. Like Pelagia Goulimari puts it: "Here, scapegoating of African-Americans by African-Americans relies on the distinction between inside and outside. The exemplary scapegoat is defined by maximal contact with the outside world" (Goulimari 2006, 197). Goulimari seems here to echo Girard according to whom the victim must be different from those who sacrifice her so as to disguise the sameness characterizing the mimetic conflict of symmetrical rivalry, but also similar with them because otherwise the transference of guilt would lack the social continuum that substitution requires in order to function as an outlet for the community it seeks to restore (Girard 2005, 5-6). Sula has been absent from her hometown for ten years during which time she has graduated from college (an unconventional move for a black girl from a poor rural background) and roamed the big cities, the result of which is advanced sexual experience and an air of urbane sophistication. Her arrival causes a stir among the populace that is partly excited, partly prejudiced:

She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. [...]. By the time she reached the Bottom, the news of her return had brought the black people out on their porches or to their windows. There were scattered hellos and nods but mostly stares. A little boy ran up to her saying, "Carry yo' bag, ma'am?". Before Sula could answer his mother had called him, "You, John. Get back in here." (*S*, 90-91)

It is only later that this mixture of solicitous curiosity, conventional politeness and hostile reserve is transformed into a full-blown antagonism; by the time Sula has her grandmother Eva committed to an old people's home run by white authorities and has had her marriage-wrecking affair with Nel's husband Jude, the tide has irrevocably turned against her. It is then and only then that the vague

rumour about Sula having calmly watched her mother burn to death while the latter had accidentally caught fire is stirred up and becomes common knowledge (*S*, 112). As it turns out, Sula is guilty of this act of sadistic voyeurism born out of her misguided resentment towards Hannah whom she suspects of not loving her. But the Bottomers do not know this and didn't pay attention to her possible guilt at the time. Soon Sula is subjected to a landslide of accusations, some of them more false than others but none exclusive to her alone (e.g. adultery, interracial relationships) and some downright superstitious (her supposedly eternal youth and invulnerable health).

The fact that Sula has been away for so long actually makes her *less* guilty of the evils affecting the Bottom. It is precisely her relative innocence that makes her an ideal substitute for the truly guilty, since to mete out punishment where punishment is due would lead to an endless series of reciprocal acts of violence. Moreover, having severed her ties with her remaining friends (Nel) and family members (Eva) Sula has no one left to avenge for her victimization. Sacrifice is, as Girard sums up, "primarily an act of violence without risk of vengeance" (2005, 13).

All this makes Sula a perfect surrogate victim, one that her community seems to find very useful, even though the idea of resorting to actual mob violence is alien to Bottomers:

In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfil itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people. (*S*, 89-90)

Even if Sula's victimizing does not amount to physical violence, it is nevertheless structured according to the logic of scapegoating, the actual physical nature of which, though deterred *ad infinitum*, is always a lurking possibility. The fact that the Bottomers need a surrogate victim is made clear by the omniscient narrator who states that "[t]heir conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways" and that "[o]nce the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to love and protect one another" (*S*, 117). The narrator's statement also underlines a united front of Bottomers being constructed *against* Sula. Bottomers make Sula out to be an incarnation of evil, no matter how tolerant they are of that evil in allowing it to exist.

In order for the scapegoating mechanism to work it must be unconscious and unaware of its unjust and arbitrary logic. In retrospect, Sula's projected evil is sugar-coated with a mythological determinism, and natural phenomena are read as omens forecasting her arrival. This naturalization of scapegoating mythology is consistent with Girard's analyses in *Violence and the Sacred* (Girard 2005, 87; 1987,). For example, on her way back to the Bottom after a decade of absence, Sula is

accompanied by “a plague of robins” (*S*, 89) and she is identified with these birds that penetrate the human habitat much in the same way as do the locusts in *Exodus*: “The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning. Nobody knew why or where they had come.” (*S*, 89). Also, Sula’s peculiar birthmark is reminiscent of those physical anomalies that mark the victim as different from the victimizers that Girard directs attention to in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Girard 1987, 121-122).

When Sula dies, the community rejoices at what they construe as “a strong sense of hope” (*S*,151), and even though they had no hand in her death, they detect a straight link between what appears as God’s due punishment of Sula (“[...] His mighty thumb having been seen at Sula’s throat.”; *S*, 151) and a new era of prosperity (“The death of Sula Peace was the best news folks up in the Bottom had had since the promise of work at the tunnel.”; *S*, 150). Of course, as the reader finds out, the economic promise does not materialize, and the winter following Sula’s demise is the harshest ever seen, complete with ice, illness and food shortage on an unprecedented scale. And because Sula is no longer there to bear the brunt, the Bottomers’ frustration erupts into old conflicts with no outlet in sight. The sacrificial feast is ruined, as is evident from “a wretched Thanksgiving” (*S*, 152) and a “Christmas [...] too shabby to cut clean but too heavy to ignore” (*S*, 154). Nature has produced the mythological plagues, but this time there is no god or demon to blame for them. Deprived of their surrogate victim, the community is torn by ever-escalating inner strife. Also, for the first time it is unable to resist the brewing conflict between another community, namely the whites.

Even though Sula is a victim, she is not immune to the resentment of other Bottomers. In his dissertation on Morrison, David Zahm Wehner points out, that “[the] community needs Sula because it defines itself against her “evil””, but also that “Sula needs the community because it permits her to be”(Wehner 2006, 204). Wehner quotes Morrison’s own view concerning this interdependency between Sula and the people of the Bottom: “she [= Sula] would have been destroyed by any other place; she was permitted to ‘be’ only in that context, and no one stoned her or killed her or threw her out” (Morrison 1984, 343²/cit. Wehner 2006, 204). But the fact that Sula is not killed could also be read in a more cynical fashion as symptomatic of a sacrificial crises and the fact that her innocence is already so apparent to her would be killers that they can’t bring themselves to lynch her. However, the absence of a real sacrifice leaves the community defenceless against future discord.

² Morrison, Toni.1984. ”Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.” In *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Pp. 339-345. Edited by Mari Evans. New York: Doubleday.

Sula, who is well aware of her role as pariah and is partly pleased by the outrage she causes in the town, predicts this sacrificial crisis on her deathbed to Nel. Her prophecy also sheds light on the racial aspect of the meltdown of what are considered the fundamental differences (regarding sexuality and age, as well as race) maintaining social order. When Nel declares that her former friend can hardly blame the community for not loving her, Sula replies in the future tense:

“Oh, they’ll love me all right. It will take time but they’ll love me. “ [...]. “After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jailbirds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers’ trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit; after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like.” (S,145-146)

This prophecy predicts the end to the ritual restraints and social taboos carefully guarded in archaic communities, but ones that Judeo-Christian / secular modernity has ceased to enforce since it can no longer believe in essential differences and can no longer justify sacrificial substitution. What remains of sacrifice is at best a conservative nostalgia for the victim who bore the guilt of the community and was retrospectively revered as a god or a goddess because of the peace he or she brought to the tribe. It is this nostalgia, after all, that has retained the sacrificial institutions of the Christian churches despite the Gospel message of siding with victims, and, in the case of Sula, has managed to postpone the inevitable crisis for so long until its eruption in the tunnel disaster. It is not by chance that Morrison has given her protagonist the last name “Peace”, for Sula’s funeral rites promise to bring the Bottom a renewed unanimity and protect it against its own anger towards the white part of Medallion. In the end, this promise fails, as history finally catches up with the Bottom and strips it of its archaic remnants.

3. Conversion and the Recognition of Sameness in *Sula*

After the tunnel disaster, *Sula*’s narrative jumps ahead twenty-four years to the year 1965. This time it is Nel who returns to what used to be the Bottom but is now turned into a golf course. It is the heyday of the civil rights movement and racial equality has increased considerably compared to what it was in the interwar period when Nel and Sula reached maturity. The eroding of social hierarchies has not reached the apocalyptic stage Sula predicted while dying, but it is now a recognized fact. And just like sacrificial conservatives, Nel cannot help missing the old times while admitting that material and class conditions at least have improved (“Things were so much better in

1965. Or so it seemed.”; *S*, 163). But Nel’s external visit is soon overshadowed by an internal journey of discovery when she meets Eva in the old people’s home she has come to do charity work. Eva, now senile, demonstrates moments of moral lucidity, ironically by way of incoherent and even spiteful behaviour towards Nel. What frightens the younger woman is that Eva not only knows about Nel’s role in Chicken Little’s death but furthermore makes no distinction between her and Sula’s involvement in the crime:

“Tell me how you killed that little boy.”

[...].

“I didn’t throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula.”

“You. Sula. What’s the difference? You was there. You watched, didn’t you? Me, I never would’ve watched.”

[...].

Eva stopped ironing and looked at Nel. For the first time her eyes looked sane.

“You think I’m guilty?” Nel was whispering.

Eva whispered back, “Who would know that better than you?” (*S*, 168-169)

The scene between the older and the younger woman echoes the final meeting between Raskolnikov and Porfiry Petrovich in *Crime and Punishment*, although Eva, having murdered her son Plum, does not hold the moral high ground of a legal authority. Also, Nel unlike Raskolnikov has not sought deliberate moral transgression but, on the contrary, has been only too happy to hold Sula (who was actually spinning the little boy around before accidentally losing her grip of his hands) as the one responsible for the death. However, now that she looks back, Nel realizes that she did experience a cathartic high over the child’s violent demise:

All these years she had been secretly proud of her calm, controlled behaviour when Sula was uncontrollable, her compassion for Sula’s frightened and shamed eyes. Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little’s body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment. (*S*, 170)

The insight Nel has into her personal guilt has wider implications with regard to the Bottom as a community. Nel, who has stood by while her former best friend was being scapegoated now realizes what it means to emotionally identify with those committing sacrificial violence. She also recognizes the universal nature of scapegoating and sees for the first time the hitherto hidden machinery of arbitrary projection that enables it. Not only are Nel and Sula equally responsible for Chicken Little’s death, but Sula, like Chicken Little, holds the universal status of the victim. Indeed, Nel is even more guilty than Sula because of the pleasure she felt as opposed to Sula who was distraught by the tragic outcome of the play that Chicken Little actually enjoyed while it lasted. On

the other hand, Sula has her moment of voyeuristic and sadistic catharsis when she watches her mother burn and does not intervene. The third victimizer is Eva, who deliberately sets her son Plum on fire, not out of spite, but because she can't bear him to grow dependent on her and endanger her hard-won autonomy. All these transgressions serve to show, how nobody is innocent of the common sacrificial and contentious atmosphere of the Bottom.

After running away from Eva, the distraught Nel finds her way to the cemetery where Sula is buried with other members of the Peace family. Carved in the gravestone are only the dates of birth and death with no first names included, so that the list of persons, all of them named "Peace", reads "like a chant" (*S*, 170-171). To this impersonal hymn of sacrificial continuum, the remorseful Nel ads an elegy of her own, but one that distinguishes the individual from the myth written in stone:

"All that time I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry- loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (*S*, 174)

Nel's final complaint that brings the novel to a close is an acknowledgment of the individual value of life (Sula is singled out from the rest of her family) and a realization of universal connectedness of all people ("We was girls together."). In his analysis of sacrificial violence Gil Bailie writes: "The tomb of those who died violently is a myth in stone. Both the myths and the tombs relate the story of past violence and give it meaning. They exonerate those who fall under their mythic influence from moral responsibility for collective violence. They edify and unify the mourners." (Bailie 1995, 228).

Given the prominence of racial themes in Morrison's novel, it is worthy to note that the sorrow Nel feels for Sula has no bottom and no top. This vertical metaphor echoes the racial hierarchy of Medallion where ironically the Bottom constitutes of hills, where as the richer valley land is owned by the whites. Although Nel's speech is very "black" (in that she uses the vernacular grammar "*we was*" instead of the linguistically correct and established expression "*we were*") and female (in that Sula and Nel were *girls* together and not just children with no gender markings), it could be argued that the passage still allows for a more inclusive interpretation that both maintains and transcends the race and gender particulars of Morrison's narrative situation. This interpretation could be achieved by emphasizing the *circular* metaphor used to describe Nel's sorrow – a sorrow that is beyond any bottom and top that have thus far marked the perversion of the hierarchy of heaven and earth, or what I would call an equivalent to what Girard in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*

first called the deviation of transcendence. In the circles of universal mourning of one's neighbour, it seems, there is ultimately no difference between black and white.

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