

Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Journey Through Identity and Community

Toni Morrison's novel "*Sula*" explores the complex friendship between two Black women against the backdrop of a changing America. Set in the neighborhood of Bottom in the fictional city of Medallion, Ohio, the novel spans from the 1910s to the 1960s, chronicling the lives of Nel Wright and Sula Peace as they navigate friendship, betrayal, and societal expectations.

Through rich characterization and lyrical prose, Morrison examines themes of racial identity, female friendship, and the search for self in a society that restricts both Black people and women. As we explore this powerful work, we'll uncover how Morrison's masterful storytelling illuminates the African-American experience in the first half of the 20th century.



Registration No.
201015194R



14 Scotts Road, Far East Plaza #06-02
Singapore 228213



+65 97116839



mindlab-international.com

Toni Morrison: A Literary Giant



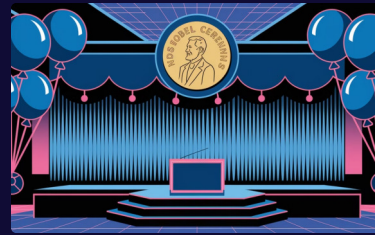
Early Life and Education

Born in Ohio to a working-class family that fled the South to escape racism and economic oppression, Morrison attended Howard University (1949-1953) and earned a Master's Degree at Cornell.



Literary Career

Published her first novel, "The Bluest Eye" in 1970, followed by "Sula" (1973), "Song of Solomon" (1977), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Beloved" (1987).



Accolades and Impact

Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, becoming the first African-American woman to receive this honor. Taught at prestigious universities including Princeton and Rutgers.



Legacy

Morrison's work explores the Black experience in America with unparalleled depth and beauty. Her final novel, "God Help the Child," was published in 2015.



Historical Context: America's Racial Landscape



Post-Civil War Era

Though freed from slavery, African-Americans faced new forms of economic servitude and social oppression with almost no legal or political power.



World War I Impact

Black Americans hoped military service would earn political rights, but President Wilson's government showed no interest in granting new protections despite their loyal service.



Economic Evolution

By the 1930s-40s, Black Americans gained some legal rights through entrepreneurship and economic advancement, though discrimination remained pervasive.

Morrison's novel alludes to this history through characters like Shadrack, a young Black man who fights in Europe during WWI and returns home broken. By 1965—the year in which the novel ends—Black families had more prosperity than ever before, yet remained largely segregated in poorer communities, far from whites.

The Bottom: A Community Defined by Irony

The novel's setting, the Bottom, exemplifies the cruel irony of racial dynamics in America. When a white farmer promised a freed slave "bottom land," he manipulated language to give him the hilly, arid land at the "bottom of heaven" rather than the fertile valley soil.



The Bottom Community

Despite harsh conditions, Black residents built a vibrant community in the Bottom.



Transformation

By the novel's end in 1965, the Bottom has been converted into a golf course for wealthy whites.



Geographic Reversal

The formerly undesirable valley land becomes prime real estate, symbolizing how power structures shift while fundamental inequalities persist.

This geographic reversal symbolizes how power structures can shift superficially while fundamental inequalities persist. The Black community loses both its physical space and its sense of solidarity, highlighting the complex relationship between place, identity, and belonging in American society.

Plot Timeline: A Generational Saga

1910s-1920s

Shadrack returns from WWI traumatized and institutes National Suicide Day. Young Nel Wright and Sula Peace become friends. Sula accidentally causes Chicken Little's drowning. Hannah Peace dies in a fire while Sula watches.



1927-1937

Nel marries Jude Greene. Sula leaves the Bottom for ten years to attend college and travel. Upon her return, Sula sends her grandmother Eva to a nursing home and begins an affair with Nel's husband Jude, who subsequently abandons Nel.



1940-1941

Sula becomes ill and dies after a final confrontation with Nel. Following Sula's death, a frost and disease wave hit the Bottom. During National Suicide Day in January 1941, dozens of townspeople die when a cliff collapses at the New River Road site.



1965

Nel visits Eva in the nursing home, where Eva accuses Nel of complicity in Chicken Little's death. Nel realizes she has been missing Sula, not Jude, all these years.

Major Characters: Complex Portraits of Humanity



Sula Peace

Wild and resourceful with a distinctive birthmark, Sula defies social conventions. After traveling America seeking fulfillment, she returns to the Bottom and disrupts Nel's marriage. Though viewed as wicked by the community, Sula refuses to embrace self-loathing and seeks genuine connection.



Nel Wright Greene

Orderly and proper, Nel follows societal rules like her mother Helene. Though capable of great empathy, she secretly resents Sula's vivaciousness. After her marriage to Jude collapses, Nel struggles with loneliness, only realizing too late that her deepest bond was with Sula.



Eva Peace

The formidable matriarch who sacrificed her leg (possibly for insurance money) to support her family. Eva commands respect in the Bottom and names the community's babies. Capable of both nurturing care and shocking cruelty, she burns her son Plum alive rather than watch him suffer with addiction.



Shadrack

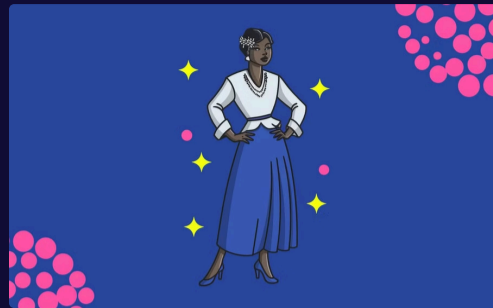
A WWI veteran with deep emotional scars who establishes National Suicide Day. Though feared by many, Shadrack shows surprising tenderness. His misinterpreted word "always" to young Sula after Chicken Little's death profoundly impacts her life's trajectory.

Minor Characters: The Fabric of Community



Hannah Peace

Eva's oldest daughter and Sula's mother who "ripples with sex." After her husband's death, Hannah takes many lovers but never allows them to stay overnight. Her casual comment that she loves but doesn't like Sula deeply wounds her daughter. Hannah dies mysteriously by burning, which Sula watches without emotion.



Helene Wright

Nel's mother, raised by her grandmother to reject her own mother's life as a prostitute. Helene is proud, pious, and demands control over every aspect of her life. She passes these qualities to Nel, valuing propriety and social standing above emotional connection.



Ajax

Initially appearing as a crude, sexist man who catcalls young girls, Ajax later reveals a sensitive, mysterious side. His relationship with Sula is unique because he genuinely listens to her thoughts. Their affair ends when Ajax gives in to his desire for independence.



Jude Greene

Nel's husband who works as a porter after being denied construction jobs due to racism. Initially loving and ambitious, his frustration with limited opportunities leads him to seek validation through an affair with Sula, ultimately abandoning Nel and their children.



Plum Peace

Eva's son who returns from war with severe addiction issues. Once her favorite child, Plum becomes withdrawn and dependent. Unable to bear watching his decline, Eva makes the shocking decision to burn him alive in an act she considers mercy.



The Deweys

Three unrelated boys adopted by Eva who inexplicably become physically identical despite different ages and backgrounds. Eva gives them all the same name, and they become an inseparable unit that mysteriously never ages, representing the community's collective identity.

These characters collectively illustrate how the community of the Bottom functions as an ecosystem of interdependent relationships, where personal choices ripple outward to affect everyone connected to them.

Themes: The Heart of Morrison's Vision



Race and Racism

Morrison examines how Black people struggle in a country with a history of persecution. Characters face systematic manipulation by whites who control laws, social norms, and language itself to maintain power imbalances.



Love and Sexuality

Complex relationships reveal how characters use sexuality to forge connections. Eva's "loving murder" of Plum and Sula's affair with Nel's husband demonstrate how love can drive people to actions that appear cruel.



Suffering and Community Identity

The Bottom's identity forms around shared tragedy. Residents develop a pessimistic outlook, accepting pain as inevitable and finding ways to process it through rituals like National Suicide Day.



Women, Motherhood, and Gender Roles

Female bonds—both motherhood and friendship—sustain the community. Yet society teaches women that finding a husband is their ultimate purpose, endangering female friendships through competition for men.

Symbols and Motifs: The Language of Meaning



Sula's Birthmark

The stemmed rose birthmark above Sula's eye darkens as she ages, symbolizing her maturity and growing sadness. Its shape suggests her androgynous qualities—both feminine (rose) and masculine (stem). Each character interprets it differently, revealing more about them than about Sula.



Fire

Present in the deaths of both Hannah and Plum Peace, fire represents both destruction and mercy. Its beautiful yet devastating nature symbolizes life itself—simultaneously cruel and kind, impossible to simplify.



Plague of Robins

The birds that accompany Sula's return to the Bottom are interpreted as an omen of evil. This ambiguous sign shows how people can misinterpret neutral events to fit their biased opinions.



New River Road

The perpetually unfinished road symbolizes false hope and manipulation. Authorities use it to justify denying healthcare and charging extra rent to Black residents, revealing how institutions prolong Black suffering through empty promises.

Chapter Analysis: 1919–1922

1

1919: Shadrack's Trauma

The novel begins with Shadrack's return from WWI with severe PTSD. His creation of National Suicide Day represents his attempt to contain his fear of death by confining it to one day. The community initially rejects but eventually accepts this ritual, showing how suffering becomes normalized.



1920: Nel's Awakening

Nel's journey to New Orleans with her mother Helene reveals racial hierarchies and gender expectations. Witnessing her mother's deferential behavior toward whites and subsequent contempt from Black men, Nel resolves never to be made vulnerable in the same way.



1921: Eva's Sacrifice

Eva Peace's history reveals her extraordinary sacrifices for her children, including possibly cutting off her own leg for insurance money. Her mercy killing of her drug-addicted son Plum demonstrates her complex, fierce love that refuses to watch him suffer.



1922: Friendship and Tragedy

Nel and Sula's friendship forms as they protect each other from bullies. Their accidental drowning of Chicken Little becomes a pivotal moment that binds them in guilt and secrecy, foreshadowing the complex moral ambiguities of their relationship.

Chapter Analysis: 1923–1937



1923: Maternal Love Questioned

Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved her children, revealing the complexity of maternal love. Hannah's mysterious death by fire while Sula watches impassively creates another rift in the Peace family.



1927: Marriage and Separation

Nel marries Jude Greene, who dreams of working on the New River Road. Their wedding marks the beginning of Sula's ten-year absence from the Bottom, during which she attends college and travels America.



1937: Sula's Return and Betrayal

Sula returns to the Bottom accompanied by a "plague of robins." She sends Eva to a nursing home and begins an affair with Nel's husband, destroying their marriage and friendship.

These chapters establish the central conflict between Nel's acceptance of societal norms and Sula's rejection of them. Hannah's question about maternal love parallels Sula's later actions, suggesting that conventional notions of love and loyalty are insufficient for understanding human relationships.



Chapter Analysis: 1939–1965

1939: Community Rejection

The Bottom turns against Sula, blaming her for everything from accidents to deaths. Ironically, their hatred unites them in protecting and loving one another. Meanwhile, Sula begins a meaningful relationship with Ajax, who respects her independence.

1940: Final Confrontation

Nel visits the dying Sula, demanding to know why she betrayed their friendship. Sula responds that she values independence above all and challenges Nel with the question: "If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" Sula dies alone, her last thought being to tell Nel about death.

1941: Collective Tragedy

After Sula's death, misfortune strikes the Bottom. During National Suicide Day, townspeople march to the unfinished New River Road and, in their anger at the deception, accidentally cause a cliff collapse that kills dozens.

1965: Realization and Regret

Nel visits Eva, who accuses her of watching Chicken Little's drowning with pleasure. Nel finally realizes she has been missing Sula, not Jude, all these years, ending with her cry of grief that has "no bottom and no top, just circles and circles of sorrow."

Quotes: The Power of Morrison's Language



Identity and Self-Discovery

"There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn't exist at all."

Shadrack finds stability in his blackness, even as he views himself through the degrading lens of a toilet bowl—symbolizing how racism forces Black Americans to accept lesser versions of themselves.



Friendship and Betrayal

"I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?"

Sula's challenge to Nel reveals the complex nature of their friendship and suggests that Nel's inability to forgive stems from pre-existing resentment and societal expectations about female loyalty.



Love and Sacrifice

"I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again."

Eva explains her decision to kill Plum, revealing how maternal love can manifest as mercy killing when a mother cannot bear to watch her child suffer.



Memory and Regret

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat."

Nel's realization that she has been mourning the loss of Sula rather than her husband reveals how deeply intertwined their identities were, despite years of estrangement.



Community and Belonging

"Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another."

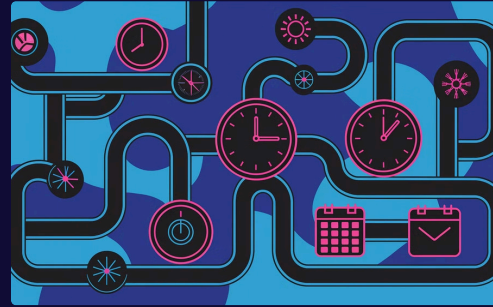
Morrison reveals the paradoxical way Sula's perceived wickedness strengthens the Bottom community, showing how outsiders often serve as unifying forces for marginalized groups.

Literary Significance and Techniques



Magical Realism

Morrison employs elements of magical realism throughout the novel. Characters speak from beyond the grave, the deweys never age physically, and supernatural events are presented as ordinary occurrences. This technique blurs the line between fantasy and reality, allowing Morrison to explore deeper truths about human experience.



Non-Linear Narrative

The novel jumps between time periods and perspectives, creating a rich tapestry of interconnected lives. This structure mirrors the way memory works and emphasizes how past events continue to shape present realities for the characters.



Symbolism and Ambiguity

Morrison uses ambiguous symbols like Sula's birthmark, which is interpreted differently by each character who sees it. This technique emphasizes how meaning is subjective and constructed through personal perspective.



Literary Allusions

The novel contains references to works like Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" (Sula as a marked outcast) and Faulkner's "The Sound and the Fury" (the transformation of Black land into a white golf course). These allusions place Morrison's work in conversation with American literary tradition while offering a critique of its racial blind spots.

Contemporary Relevance: Sula's Enduring Power



Female Friendship

Morrison's nuanced portrayal challenges the notion that women's fulfillment comes primarily through romantic relationships with men.



Racial Justice & Economic Inequality

The Bottom's transformation into a golf course parallels modern urban displacement of Black neighborhoods.



Community vs. Individualism

Sula's refusal to conform examines the tension between community belonging and individual freedom.

Nearly fifty years after its publication, "Sula" remains strikingly relevant to contemporary issues. The novel's exploration of how racism shapes communities echoes in current discussions about systemic inequality and gentrification. The Bottom's transformation into a golf course parallels modern urban displacement of Black neighborhoods.

Morrison's nuanced portrayal of female friendship challenges the still-prevalent notion that women's primary fulfillment comes through romantic relationships with men. Nel's realization that she missed Sula more than Jude speaks to the enduring power of female bonds.

Perhaps most significantly, "Sula" examines the tension between community belonging and individual freedom that continues to define American identity. Through Sula's refusal to conform and the town's complex response to her independence, Morrison offers no easy answers but invites readers to question how we balance personal authenticity with communal responsibility.