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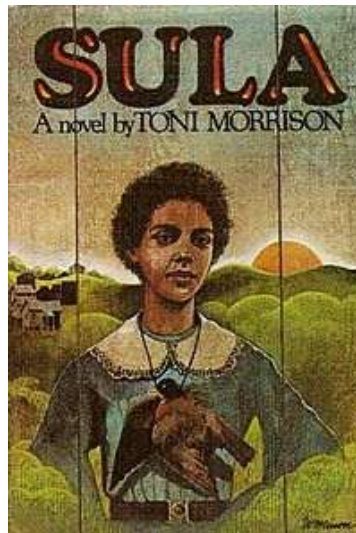
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## A Critical Analysis of *Sula* by Toni Morrison

P. Sreenivasulu Reddy, Ph.D.

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### Introduction

Toni Morrison got recognition as a writer with her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. In 1973 she has published her second novel *Sula* and she has been writing ever since. In this novel

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the protagonist, Sula Peace, lives a life of fierce independence and total disregard for social conventions. Toni Morrison gives us an insight into Sula's personality, "she had no center, no speck around which to grow", thus, "no ego". Such absence of a structure and foundation leads to the decision "to be consistent only with herself". That in its turn appears to result in selfishness, indulgence of sexual desires and total absence of respect towards everything that does not concern her. This article attempts to analyze how the plot of this novel is well knitted into various themes of the novel and characterization.



Toni Morrison

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni\\_Morrison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison)

## Plot Analysis

The plot of *Sula* consists of two parts. The novel opens around 1965 with a prologue; after the first section, it jumps back in time to the year 1919. From that point, the plot moves forward chronologically until the very end of the novel, which is also set in 1965. In between the beginning and the end, each chapter is titled by a year. Even though the book spans a lifetime, the plot is not hard to follow because of the time designations.

The novel opens with an introduction to The Bottom, the setting for the whole novel. It also begins to introduce the key characters, starting with Shadrack. Sula is introduced in the third section, and the rest of the book centers on her and her friendship with Nel. The families of Nel and Sula are contrasted. Nel is the product of a family that believes deeply in social conventions; hers is a stable home, though some might characterize it as rigid. Nel is uncertain of the conventional life her mother, Helene, wants for her; these doubts are hammered home when she meets Rochelle, her grandmother and a former prostitute, the only unconventional woman in her family line. Sula's family is very different. She lives with her grandmother, Eva, and her mother, Hannah, both of whom are seen by the town as eccentric and loose. Their house also serves as a home for three informally adopted boys and a steady stream of boarders.

Despite their differences, Sula and Nel become fiercely attached to each other during adolescence. However, a traumatic accident changes everything. One day, Sula playfully swings

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a neighborhood boy, Chicken Little, around by his hands. When she loses her grip, the boy falls into a nearby river and drowns. They never tell anyone about the accident even though they did not intend to harm the boy.

The two girls begin to grow apart. After high school, Nel chooses to marry and settles into the conventional role of wife and mother. Sula follows a wildly divergent path and lives a life of fierce independence, maintaining a total disregard for social conventions. Shortly after Nel's wedding, Sula leaves the Bottom for a period of 10 years. She has many affairs, some of which, it is rumored, with white men. However, she finds people following the same boring routines elsewhere, so she returns to the Bottom and to Nel.

When Sula returns to Medallion, Part Two begins, and the plot resumes and moves rapidly toward Sula's death. Upon her return, the town regards Sula as the very personification of evil for her blatant disregard of social conventions. Their hatred in part rests upon Sula's interracial relationships, but is crystallized when Sula has an affair with Nel's husband, Jude, who subsequently abandons Nel. Ironically, the community's labeling of Sula as evil actually improves their own lives. Her presence in the community gives them the impetus to live harmoniously with one another. Nel breaks off her friendship with Sula. Just before Sula dies in 1940, they achieve a half-hearted reconciliation. With Sula's death, the harmony that had reigned in the town quickly dissolves. The final section set in 1965, like the opening section. Nel acknowledges that Sula is the best thing that has ever happened to her, more than motherhood or marriage. Additionally, Shadrack reveals the meaning that Sula had in his life. The novel has come full circle into a unified whole.

## **Theme Analysis**

The major theme of *Sula* is right versus wrong. The question of right versus wrong in the novel can be traced all the way back to the childhoods of Sula and Nel. As the two girls played with Chicken Little, a young child from the neighborhood, Sula was swinging him around by his hands. She accidentally threw him into the water, and he drowned. Sula and Nel decided not to tell anyone the truth about what had happened. The result is that Sula goes through life believing that she is evil because she killed Chicken Little; in contrast, Nel judges herself to be good because it was not she who caused Chicken Little's death. The lives of both women are clearly shaped by the views they have of themselves. As an adult, Sula is wild and unconventional, while Nel is the picture of propriety and goodness.

Prompted by a discussion about Chicken Little with Sula's grandmother, Nel goes to visit the grave of Sula. There she comes to terms with the truth of her past. Nel remembers that Sula had been terrified and anguished over Chicken Little's death; she certainly had not wanted the boy to die, but blamed herself fully for the accident. Nel made no attempt to change Sula's thinking. Instead, Nel had inwardly rejoiced at the death, proving the cruelty and evil in her heart. The truth is that Sula lived a more honest life than Nel; she accepted herself as evil and lived accordingly. Nel, on the other hand, has lived a hypocritical life, pretending to be good and

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pure in every way. At the end, however, she faces the falseness of her life and embraces the dead Sula as her best friend and judges her to be good, in spite of the opinion of the community.

*Sula* is also a story about the presence and absence of family and friendship. The entire book revolves around two friends, Sula and Nel. Morrison even indicates that their friendship is the most important relationship in their lives. Unfortunately, even though the girls are closely bonded in their childhood, they are not really truthful with one another in their adulthood. Even though they seem to need one another, they betray each other. Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, breaking up the marriage, and Nel refuses to tell Sula that she should forgive herself for Chicken Little's death. The two women are separated, and mature according to the beliefs they have about themselves; Sula acts out her evil nature, while Nel is the picture of goodness and propriety.

### **Another Theme**

Another theme that runs throughout the novel is the influence of family on a person's being. Nel's maternal grandmother had been a prostitute in New Orleans. Therefore, Nel's mother, Helene, determines that she will rise above such sinfulness and live a life of goodness, purity, and respectability. She comes to The Bottom to escape the ill repute of her mother's past. She raises her daughter to have her own moral values, even though Nel tries not to be just like her mother. Sula, on the other hand, receives little attention from her mother, Hannah, or her grandmother, Eva, who clearly favors Sula's brother. Hannah is a sensuous woman who seeks the company of all the men in town; Sula disapproves of her mother's behavior and views her with a detached sense of alienation. When Hannah catches on fire, Eva jumps from the second story to try and save her, while Sula watches from the porch and does nothing. Ironically, Sula grows up to be much like her mother, believing she has no need for attachments and having no self-respect. Sula even destroys her one friendship in life by sleeping with Nel's husband.

### **Character Analysis**

#### ***Sula Peace***

As a child, Sula is strange, mysterious, somewhat defiant, and definitely different from those around her. Her life is shaped by two occurrences in her youth: the death of Chicken Little, for which she blames herself, and the overheard conversation of her mother when she says she does not really like her daughter. Sula grows up feeling guilty and unloved. Her only joy is spending time with her best friend, Nel Wright. The two of them become inseparable, even though they are totally different in background and personality.

As soon as the wedding of Nel with Jude is over, Sula leaves Medallion for ten years. When Sula returns to The Bottom after her ten-year absence, it is obvious that she has definitely changed. The people in Medallion, who have always found Sula to be strange, now feel totally alienated from her. Her difference makes her unacceptable. As a result, every bad thing that happens in the town is blamed on her, especially after she puts Eva in a nursing home, and has

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her affair with her best friend's husband. Because the people of The Bottom, in their small-mindedness, reject her, Sula feels totally isolated; then when Nel rejects her as well, she has nothing to live for and goes to her grave early. On her deathbed, Sula reflects on her life. She remembers the death of Chicken Little, and watching her mother burn to death. She decides her life had little meaning. It is a tragic comment on Sula's existence.

Despite her strange ways, there are a few moments in which Sula is portrayed with utter sympathy. In Shadrack's cabin, she is seen as a frightened, guilt-ridden, and inconsolable child. When she hears her mother say she does not like her, Sula is portrayed as a totally crushed daughter. When Nel marries, she becomes the jilted friend who feels she must leave town to find herself. On her deathbed, she is the pathetic vision of a wasted life who destroyed the relationship with her one true friend, Nel Wright; in pain and misery, she calls out to Nel, but it is too late. After Sula dies, Nel knows that her friend's negative vision of herself shaped her whole being. She realizes that Sula was totally misunderstood all her life, even by Nel; this misunderstanding constitutes the tragedy of the novel.

### **Nel Wright**

Nel's background is different from that of Sula. Her family is respectable and Nel is brought up to be the same way. When Sula returns to Medallion after a ten-year absence, Nel, who has suffered from a lack of friendship, is eager to befriend Sula, in spite of the opinion of the town about her. Then when she finds Sula in bed with her husband, she is infuriated. And later, when Jude leaves her out of shame, Nel is truly devastated. She goes through the next years of her life believing that she mourns the loss of her husband, when in truth it is Sula that she misses. Yet she is too proud and proper to approach Sula. It is only when her old friend is dying that Nel dares, in her "goodness," to go and see her; but even on her deathbed, she judges Sula to be evil and does not go to her funeral.

After her own children are adults and abandon her, Nel decides to pay Eva a visit. The old woman accuses Nel of being just as guilty for Chicken Little's death as Sula. Nel is finally forced to come to grips with the truth. Sula was not really the evil one; instead, it is she herself that is evil - hard-hearted and accusing; she even admits to herself that she delighted in Chicken Little's death, while Sula was horrified by it. Nel suddenly knows that her friendship with Sula was the best thing she has ever had, stronger than motherhood or marriage. She accepts that Sula was really the other side of her coin. The unique combination of the two women, who completely complement each other, forges a friendship that supercedes everything else in their lives.

### ***Shadrack***

Although Shadrack is a minor character, he takes on more importance because the actual story starts and ends with him. He created a holiday, National Suicide Day. He becomes important in the story of The Bottom. Shadrack only interacts with Sula one time in the novel.

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Shadrack's National Suicide Day has an element of both catalyst and closure for The Bottom. Throughout the novel, he faithfully celebrates his holiday, eagerly leading a parade through town that few people join. Ironically, after Sula's death, Shadrack has no excitement for National Suicide Day and has to make himself go to the parade; but the townsfolk, excited to be rid of Sula, join in the procession. The excitement swells, and the Blacks find themselves heading toward the tunnel being built by the whites. Filled with hatred for the tunnel, they begin to destroy it from the outside. Then they go inside to do more damage, but the tunnel caves in and most of them are killed - on National Suicide Day; it is as if their own erroneous understanding has destroyed them. Shadrack appropriately stands above on a hill observing the death scene and ringing a bell.

### ***Eva***

Eva, Sula's grandmother, is alive during the entire span of the novel. She is significant in the shaping of Sula and in the movement of the novel's plot. When her husband leaves her as a young mother, she goes away for a while. In her absence, she cuts off one of her legs in order to collect insurance money to use for raising her children. The community looks up to her literally and figuratively. Sula, however, is not in awe of Eva. When the one-legged Eva jumps from the second story of her house in order to save Hannah from burning, Sula makes no attempt to help either her mother or her grandmother. It is her symbolic rejection of the life that has been forced on her, largely by Eva. Later, Sula puts Eva in a nursing home instead of caring for her, much to the shock and horror of the community.

Eva is a survivor and is never afraid to act or to speak her mind. When Nel visits her at the end of the novel, she is an old and confused woman, but she clearly accuses Nel of being guilty of Chicken Little's death; she forces Sula's friend to acknowledge that she was more evil than Sula. It is a life-changing experience for Nel. Here we can see, Eva has done much to shape both Sula and Nel, the two central characters in the novel.

### **Conclusion**

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a fine work of art, well planned and well executed, without losing any human interest. Toni's narrative will be greatly appreciated in any race or ethnic group that gives importance to family and friendship relations. It certainly is appealing to every Indian heart.

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