Sula Study Guide

Sula by Toni Morrison

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Introduction

Sula, published in 1973 in New York, is Toni Morrison's second novel. Set in the early 1900s in a small Ohio town called Medallion, it tells the story of two African-American friends, Sula and Nel, from their childhood through their adulthood and Sula's death. Morrison drew on her own smalltown, Midwestern childhood to create this tale of conformity and rebellion.

Morrison began writing *Sula* in 1969, a time of great activism among African Americans and others who were working toward equal civil rights and opportunities. The book addresses issues of racism, bigotry, and suppression of African Americans; it depicts the despair people feel when they can't get decent jobs, and the determination of some to survive. Eva, for example, cuts off her leg in order to get money to raise her family. Morrison shows how, faced with racist situations, some people had to grovel to whites simply to get by, as Helene does on a train heading through the South. Others, however, fought back, as Sula does when she threatens some white boys who are harassing her and Nel.

The novel was well received by critics, who particularly praised her vivid imagery, strong characterization, and poetic prose, as well as her terse, realistic dialogue. The book was nominated for a National Book Award in 1974

Author Biography

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio. She was the second of four children of Ramah and George Wofford. She studied English at Howard University, and earned a master's degree in English literature from Cornell, where she wrote her thesis on William Faulkner. She then became a teacher of English at Texas Southern University, and later at Howard University, where she worked until 1964.

While teaching at Howard, Morrison began to write. She told an interviewer for Borders that her beginning was almost accidental; she joined a group of colleagues at Howard University who had formed a writer's group and because members couldn't come unless they had written something, she began writing a short story, which eventually became her first novel.

In 1958 the author married Harold Morrison, an architect, with whom she had two sons, but in 1964 they divorced. After the divorce, Morrison moved to Syracuse, New York, where she supported her family by working as a book editor at Random House. During her tenure there, she edited the work of many well-known African-American authors, including Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, and Angela Davis.

Her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, was completed in the mid-1960s, but Morrison received many rejections of the novel until 1969, when it was finally accepted by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, and published in 1970. Like all of Morrison's work, it considers issues of race and the African-American experience. *Sula* was published in 1973 and was nominated for a National Book Award in 1974. *Song of Solomon* was published in 1977 and won the National Book Critics Circle Award for that year. *Tar Baby* was published in 1981, and made best-seller lists for four months. *Beloved* (1987), which tells the story of ex-slaves haunted by their past, was widely acclaimed, as was *Jazz* (1992). In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, and thus became the first African American and only the eighth woman ever to win the award. According to Maureen O'Brien in *Publishers Weekly*, Morrison said, "What is most wonderful for me personally is to know that the Prize has at last been awarded to an African American. I thank God that my mother is alive to see this day." In 1996, she received the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Paradise, set in an all-black town in Oklahoma, was published in 1998. Morrison has also written and edited many works of literary criticism, as well as a play, *Dreaming Emmett*. Her essays and interviews have been widely published in both popular and scholarly periodicals.

Since 1988, Morrison has been a professor at Princeton University, where she holds the Robert F. Goheen Professorship of the Humanities and is the chair of the Creative Writing Program. According to an article on the Web site *Voices from the Gaps*, Morrison was giving a lecture at Princeton when a student asked her who she wrote for. Morrison said,

I want to write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people people who can't be faked, people who don't need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria.

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Plot Summary

Introduction

Sula opens with a description of "The Bottom," the African-American section of a town called Medallion in Ohio, which has been bought by whites, who force out the remaining inhabitants and level the old buildings to create a golf course. The Bottom got its name from a joke played on a slave by a white farmer, who said he would give the slave his freedom, and a section of rich bottom land, in exchange for doing some difficult chores. The slave fulfilled his work and the farmer gave him his freedom, but was reluctant to give away fertile bottom land. Instead, he told the slave that a section of eroded land high in the hills was really bottom land, because from God's point of view, it was "the bottom of heaven." The slave, not knowing any better, accepted the land, which turned out to be worthless for farming, and thus the African-American settlement was founded. The Bottom subsequently has a rich history as a lively African-American community.

1919

Shadrack is a shell-shocked veteran of World War I who is returned to the Bottom by a sheriff who figures out that he was originally from there. He lives in a shack and becomes famous for his invented holiday, National Suicide Day, which he celebrates on January 3rd of each year, starting in 1920. On this holiday, people who don't want to continue living with the fear of death are invited to kill themselves, thus taking control of a normally uncontrollable event. Although this holiday initially frightens people in the Bottom, eventually they become used to it and it becomes a part of local culture.

1920

Helene, Nel's mother, is the daughter of a prostitute, but was raised by her grandmother in a strict and sheltered environment. Helene marries Wiley Wright and moves to Medallion, where she lives an upright and respectable life, and forces Nel to do the same. When she receives a letter saying her grandmother, Cecile, is very ill, she reluctantly decides to go to New Orleans to see her. Her reluctance comes from the widespread racism in the South, and on the train ride to New Orleans, her fears are realized. The African-American passengers must sit in segregated cars, and there are no bathrooms for them; they have to use fields near the train tracks. Helene also must grovel to a white train conductor who is harassing her.

Cecile dies before Helene's arrival, but Helene sees her mother, Rochelle, and introduces Nel to her. Nel is fascinated and shocked by her grandmother's exotic looks and behavior. All of these experiences change Nel; after the trip, for the first time, she realizes that she is a separate person, an individual. She meets another girl, Sula, who comes from a wild family but appears at first to be calm and quiet. Helene, swayed by this good behavior, allows Nel to be friends with Sula, and the friendship grows.

1921

This chapter describes Sula's family, particularly her grandmother Eva. When Eva and her three children are abandoned by her husband, she goes away, then returns eighteen months later with only one leg and ten thousand dollars. Rumors say that she cut off her leg in order to collect the insurance money. She builds a huge, rambling house, where she lives on the top floor and gets around in a wheelchair. She uses the rest of the space to house "her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders."

Eva's daughter, Pearl, marries and moves away; her daughter, Hannah, is a promiscuous widow, and she and her daughter, Sula, live in Eva's house; and a third child, Plum, fights in World War I and returns home a drug addict. When Eva finds out the extent of his addiction, she pours kerosene on him and burns him to death while he's in a drug-induced, euphoric haze.

1922

Sula and Nel are now twelve years old, and are just becoming interested in men. They are best friends, and have a deep understanding, despite their different personalities. Nel is calm and reliable, while Sula is unpredictable and even violent. When they're harassed by some white boys, Sula cuts off the tip of her own finger to show them how tough she is, which scares them away.

Sula overhears her mother telling some friends that she loves Sula, but doesn't like her. Sula is deeply hurt, but says nothing. She and Nel go down to the river, seeking shade from the heat, and see Chicken Little, a little boy. They play with him, and Sula grabs his arms and swings him around; her grip slips, and he flies out into the river and drowns. Frightened, Sula runs to see if Shadrack— who is in the nearest dwelling—has seen the incident. Shadrack doesn't even give Sula a chance to ask her question, instead saying, "Always," which Sula takes as a threat. Terrified, she flees, and Nel tells her it's not her fault, it was just an accident. Neither of them confesses to the killing or goes for any more help.

Chicken Little's body is found by a white man, who fishes it out and is annoyed at the inconvenience of dealing with a dead black child. Three days later, Chicken Little's remains are returned to his mother, and his funeral is held. Nel and Sula both attend, but they say nothing.

1923

The Bottom is in the middle of a summer drought, and Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved her children. Eva is angered by this question, and says that the sacrifice of her leg to keep them alive proves that she loves them. Hannah asks why, if she loved her children, she burned Plum to death. Eva says that she had many hard times keeping

Plum alive as a child, that the war and the addiction had turned him back into a child, and that this time, she didn't have the power to save him. She says she killed him out of love, wanting him to die as a man. She explains that she held Plum lovingly in her arms before she killed him.

Hannah tells Eva that she dreamed of a red wedding dress, an omen of violence. She also tells her that Sula has been acting up lately, which everybody assumes is because she is getting her period. Sula is not the only person in the Bottom who is acting strangely. The heat and the drought have everyone on edge. Eva's comb is missing, and the shape and color of Sula's birthmark seem to be changing.

Like everyone else in the Bottom, Hannah begins doing the summer canning of fruits and vegetables. When she goes out in the yard and lights the canning fire, her dress catches fire and bursts into flame. Eva hurls herself out of her wheelchair and through the second-story window, hoping she can drag herself across the yard fast enough to save Hannah, but Hannah runs out of the yard and becomes severely burned when neighbors try to put out the fire. An ambulance arrives, but Hannah dies on the way to the hospital. Eva, who was injured in the fall, almost bleeds to death.

While she is in the hospital recovering, Eva remembers the dream of the red wedding dress and realizes the fire is the event it foretold. She also realizes that during the fire, Sula was on the porch, watching her own mother burn to death and doing nothing to help. She tells her friends about this, but they all say Sula was probably so shocked that she couldn't do anything to help. Eva, however, believes that Sula intentionally let her mother die.

1927

Four years have passed, and Nel begins a relationship with Jude Greene, a waiter who wants to get a job on a road-building crew. His dream comes to nothing, however, because the road crew will not hire African Americans even if, like Jude, they are better-equipped for the hard labor than the "thinarmed white boys." This makes Jude bitter, and he asks Nel to marry him, hoping marriage will make him feel more manly. Nel happily accepts. Helene, Nel's mother, is excited, too, and plans a big, extravagant wedding unlike any ever held in the Bottom before.

The wedding is a fine event, and Nel is her usual traditional, proper self, looking forward to a settled life as a good wife. After the wedding, she notices Sula slip away. Sula leaves town, and does not return for almost ten years.

1937

Sula comes back to the Bottom, wearing expensive clothes, on the same day that a huge flock of robins arrives. The townspeople link these two events, considering them both evil omens. Sula walks through streets full of bird excrement as the people stare at

her. She finally gets to Eva's house, and the first thing Eva says is, "I might have knowed them birds meant something."

Their relationship is now cold. Eva tells Sula that she needs to find a man and settle down, but Sula responds that she only needs herself. Sula reminds Eva that she killed Plum, and Eva reminds Sula that she stood by and watched her mother die.

Sula threatens to set Eva on fire while she's sleeping, and Eva locks her out of her room. Later, Sula obtains guardianship over Eva and commits her to a shabby nursing home, shocking everyone in town.

Nel, on the other hand, is excited about Sula's return and hopes that they can rekindle their friendship; unlike everyone else, she believes that good will result from Sula's coming home. They do revive their friendship, and Nel discovers that Sula has traveled and has been to college. Sula tells Nell about her decision to put Eva in the nursing home, then asks for Nel's help, because Sula is not good at making big decisions like this.

Nel's husband Jude is interested in Sula, and she in him; one day, Nel finds them in bed together. Jude, ashamed, leaves Nel, destroying her safe little world; she has lost her husband and her best friend in the same day. She thinks of Chicken Little's funeral and how everyone released their grief in mourning for him, but she is not able to find that kind of release for her grief over the loss of her husband.

1939

Sula ends her relationship with Jude, and he moves to Detroit and never comes back. The townspeople are shocked at Sula's behavior and□after a rumor goes around that Sula has slept with white men, "the unforgivable thing"□they decide that she's nothing but evil and trouble, and ostracize her. She becomes the scapegoat of the town, blamed for every bad thing that happens, including accidents and deaths. Despite this, or because of it, she also has a paradoxical good effect on the town; women comfort their husbands, who have been cast off from Sula after she sleeps with them, and take better care of their aging parents and grandparents, because they don't want to mirror Sula's treatment of Eva.

Sula begins seeing a man named Albert Jacks, or Ajax, who delivers milk to her house. He believes she's not interested in commitment, and neither is he; from his point of view, the relationship is only sexual. However, she begins to love him, and when he finds out, he decides to end the relationship. She is heartbroken and miserable.

1940

Three years later, Nel and Sula are still avoiding each other, but when Nel hears that Sula is sick, she visits her. Nervously, she practices what she wants to say, but Sula only wants action, not words: she directs Nel to get her some medicine. When she

returns, they have a combative conversation in which Nel is annoyed by what she sees as Sula's arrogance about life. Nel accuses her of simply not dealing with her own loneliness, but Sula retorts that at least it's loneliness that she has chosen, not loneliness that has been forced on her by someone else leaving her (as Jude left Nel).

Nel becomes angry, but asks Sula why she had an affair with Jude. Sula says that she didn't love Jude, he simply filled a space in her life. Nel is shocked by this, and asks Sula if she ever thought about how it would hurt Nel. Sula tells Nel that she doesn't think sleeping with Jude should have broken up their friendship. Nel leaves, but not before Sula asks Nel how she knows she's the good one and Sula's the bad one; Sula says it could be the other way around.

Sula reflects on her life, and decides that it was a sad, worthless, and meaningless one. As she reflects, she realizes that she is not breathing and that her heart has stopped. She is dead, and didn't even feel her death. "Wait'll I tell Nel," she thinks.

1941

The townspeople are thrilled that Sula is dead, and believe that good omens indicate that more good changes are coming. The road contractors, getting ready to work on a tunnel, have announced they will hire African Americans, and a new nursing home is being built. However, all these signs come to nothing when a frigid spell keeps people inside, sickness increases, and the tunnel contractors don't hire many people after all. And without the threat of Sula as a catalyst, the townspeople turn to their old ways. Spouses are ignored, old people are neglected and children are beaten.

On January 3, Shadrack heads out for his annual celebration of Suicide Day. He thinks of Sula, the little girl who once came into his shack, the only visitor of his life, who is now dead. He is not really interested in running the Suicide Day celebration, but sets out anyway, ringing his bell. The townspeople are so demoralized by the recent hard times that many of them actually join him in the parade, needing an escape, and the procession eventually includes almost everyone in town. They turn toward the white part of town, toward the tunnel, "the place where their hope had lain since 1927." The mob begins smashing things, destroying the new construction. The tunnel collapses and great numbers of people are killed. Shadrack stands on a hill above, ringing his bell and watching the tragic event.

1965

Over twenty years later, Nel is fifty-five years old. She has spent her life taking care of her children, who are now grown, and who have forgotten her. She is alone, and the community of the Bottom has fallen apart; neighbors no longer take care of each other.

Nel, who still disapproves of Sula's putting Eva in the nursing home, visits Eva and finds her very confused. Eva talks about Chicken Little's death and accuses Nel of taking part in it. Nel tries to convince Eva that Sula, not Nel, caused his death, but Eva says,

"What's the difference?" She understands that Nel was there, and that she and Sula were so close that they were like a single person, so the guilt cannot be separated and portioned out.

Nel leaves, feeling frightened, thinking about the difference between "seeing" something and "watching" it. She saw the accident; she did not watch it. Watching implies some sort of implicit participation, some sort of acquiescence. She remembers how upset and miserable Sula was after the accident, while she, Nel, was calm. She thinks about Eva and how she used to think the old woman was so wonderful; now, she thinks, Eva was spiteful, and remembers that she didn't even go to Sula's funeral. Nel thinks about this spite, which has infected the entire town. She thinks back to the funeral, where she was the only African American in attendance. As she walks away from the gravesite, she senses something that makes her think of Sula, and realizes that she misses Sula deeply, and that when she thought she was missing her husband Jude after he left, she was really missing Sula. With this realization, she finally releases the grief that she has held pent up inside her for years.

Introduction

Introduction Summary

The story begins by telling how the neighborhood called the "Bottom" of the town of Medallion is being destroyed to make room for a city golf course. We learn about how the neighborhood used to be when people would hear singing and music and see dancing. We learn how outsiders would see happiness but never look deep enough to see the people's pain. This part of town is where the Negroes lived, and it all started with a "joke" – laughter on the outside, pain on the inside.

The Bottom began when a white farmer promised freedom and land to one of his slaves after completing a certain amount of work. The slave did his work and asked for his "payment." The farmer told him he had wanted to give him land in the "Bottom" which was really in the hills, but because it was so rich and fertile up there, he had decided to give him land in the valley instead. The slave begged for land in the "Bottom" and the farmer agreed. The joke is that the land required backbreaking work and the seeds washed away down the hill. This is how the "Bottom" became the Negro neighborhood. The farmer had told his slave that the hills are the bottom of heaven, and, despite the hard work, it was so beautiful that people often wondered if he was not right.

Introduction Analysis

The novel begins with the end. We find out that what we can assume to be the setting of the book (the Bottom) is now being destroyed for the purpose of a new golf course. We find out that the black people who live in the Bottom appear happy on the outside, but are actually quite unhappy, indicating some of the tension that will play out in the story. It also becomes clear that the Bottom is a beautiful place as its beauty is mentioned several times early in the story. It is also evident that beauty is important to the people who live there.

1919

1919 Summary

National Suicide Day begins on January 3, 1920 and takes place every January 3 except during WWII. After being in the war in 1917, Shadrack returns home to the Bottom of Medallion not knowing who he is or what he should do. The only thing he remembers is a window overlooking a river full of fish.

During the war, Shadrack's first encounter with the enemy surprises him because he expects to be exhilarated or terrified, but he only feels the "bite of the nail in his boot." As he rushes into the crowd of people, he turns his head and sees "the face of the soldier near him fly off."

Shadrack then opens his eyes and he is in a hospital bed. His meal is waiting for him. He "looks" for his hands and notices them as lumps under his blanket. He carefully lifts his hands towards the plate and they "grow" before his eyes. He puts them under his blanket and they shrink back. A male nurse tries to get him to eat, but Shadrack panics at his hands and the nurse's voice. During the incident, he not only knocks over his tray, but he also knocks the nurse onto another bed. He ends up in a straitjacket, which is fine with Shadrack because then he cannot see his hands. As he lies in bed in the straitjacket, he wonders what it will be like to look at his face and wonders what it will do when he sees it.

There is a huge demand for space in the hospital and Shadrack is released. He is given $217 in cash, clothing and his papers and is set "free." Shadrack does not want to encounter the people outside the hospital or the cement sidewalks, so he puts his head down and starts walking on the grass until he gets off the hospital grounds. He is weak from his one-year hospital stay and he stumbles and sweats as he walks along the road. People assume he is drunk. He finally gets to a town and sits down on a curb. He tries to untie the double knots on his boots to take them off, but he cannot maneuver his hands. He soon gets frustrated and begins crying. He is arrested and put in jail for intoxication.

In jail, he gets the courage to look at his reflection in the toilet water. He is happy to see that his is, in fact, real. He then looks at his hands, which remain motionless. He falls into a deep sleep, "deeper than hospital drugs."

The sheriff reads Shadrack's papers and gets a farmer to drive him the twenty-two miles to Medallion – his home. On the way there, Shadrack realizes that he must sort out his fear of the unexpectedness of death and dying. He decides to devote one day to it each year so the rest of the year is "safe and free." On January 3, he walks through the Bottom telling everyone this is their day to "kill themselves and each other." This worries people the first time, but by the next year, they all know that Shadrack is a virtually

harmless man that sells fish on Tuesdays and Fridays. Eventually is seems as though the people in the Bottom ignore the holiday, but it still comes up in daily conversation.

1919 Analysis

This is still an introductory chapter of the book. We meet Shadrack and learn about his new "holiday." Because Morrison chooses to use this as the first chapter, we have to know that both Shadrack and National Suicide Day will play an important role in the story. We also are introduced to two more themes that will entwine their way through the novel: war and abandonment. Shadrack's life changes when he is in the war and because of that, he changes the Bottom (even if it is for just one day a year). His abandonment for the army hospital forces him to "heal" himself and deal with his fears in his own way. He starts this healing by finally getting the courage to look at his face in a reflection and continues his healing with the creation of National Suicide Day.

1920

1920 Summary

Helene's grandmother wants her as far away from the Sundown House as possible because she is afraid she will start showing signs of her mother's "wild blood." When her nephew shows up, she pushes him to propose marriage to Helene and move her to his hometown of Medallion. Helene does well there. She is very proper and classy and is able to fit in very well. Wiley Wright works as a ship's cook and he is only home three out of sixteen days. After nine years of marriage, Helene has a daughter. Helene is a mother that raises an obedient, polite and unimaginative daughter. She likes life in Medallion and knows she is far enough away from Sundown House.

In November of 1920, she gets word that her grandmother is ill and that she should go to visit her right away. She is apprehensive about traveling alone, but knows she must go. As Helene and Nel get to the train station, they are running late and accidentally get on the "white" car. Helene does not want to go down the steps again with her luggage, so she leads Nel through the white car to the "colored" car. As they enter the colored car, the white conductor stops and reprimands her. After the encounter, Helene smiles at the conductor and this puzzles and even embarrasses Nel.

They finally get to New Orleans after days on the train, but they are too late – Helene's grandmother has already died. They meet up with Helene's mother towards whom she shows no affection. Nel thinks her grandmother smells nice and likes the hugs she gives. When Nel asks Helene what "voir" means, Helene tells her they do not speak Creole and never will.

They get home and Helene gets back into her comfortable role as mother and housekeeper. Nel sees the trip as a way to begin being an individual. She begins to imagine taking other trips. This trip and her newfound "me-ness" help her cultivate a friendship with Sula, a girl whom her mother did not want her knowing. Sula and Nel come from opposite homes. Everything clean, proper and classy in Nel's house is just the opposite in Sula's house and they both love going to each other's houses.

1920 Analysis

Nel grows up a lot on the trip to New Orleans. She learns that her mother is not always right – Nel realizes this when her mother smiles at the conductor after being reprimanded. Nel also likes her grandmother. Helene tells Nel that they do not speak Creole and never will as a way of saying they will never have a relationship with her mother. Nel takes her newfound freedom and independence as an excuse finally to make friends with Sula. The compliment each other very well because Sula can bring out the "forbidden" side of Nel and Nel can calm down Sula a bit.

1921

1921 Summary

Sula lives in her grandmother's house. Eva Peace had the house built over a five-year period and had kept adding rooms, staircases and doors. Eva now lives on the third floor in a wagon where she oversees everyone in the house: her children, boarders, friends and strays… anyone who happens to be there. She sits in her wagon because she only has one leg. Nobody ever speaks of her missing leg, but she sometimes tells story about what happened to it. She is always known for her "magnificent" remaining leg. In her wagon, she sits low enough for kids to see her at eye level and adults to look down on her, but they always feel as though they are looking up to her.

Eva had been married and has three children: Hannah, Eve (nicknamed Pearl) and Ralph (nicknamed Plum). When her husband, BoyBoy, took off after five years, Eva had only $1.65, five eggs, three beets and three children to feed. Her neighbors help her for a while, but Eva worries that her welcome will wear out. Hannah, her oldest, is too young to care for the others for her to go to work and she cannot stand the idea of returning to her family alone with three kids. Later that month, as she struggles to keep herself and her kids going, her baby, Plum, becomes very constipated. She finally takes him to the outhouse in the middle of the freezing winter and gives him an enema. At this time, she realizes she needs to do something. The next day, she drops all of her kids off at the neighbor's house and says she will be back the next day. She does not return for eighteen months and when she does, she only has one leg and a pocketbook full of money. She gathers her kids, gives Mrs. Suggs ten dollars and begins building her house.

At one point, BoyBoy returns (with one of his women) and at this time, Eva realizes she hates him. She also realizes that this hatred is what will keep her "alive and happy." After her visit, she spends more time in her room and only voluntarily leaves it one time after 1910.

Eva takes in many people to her house including newlyweds and children. When Sula is eleven, Eva "rescues" three children from the street. Despite their given names, she names all three boys Dewey; they eventually come out of their shells and bond as "the deweys." They all have very different physical features, but eventually they seem to meld together as one person. They all start school the same year even though one is four, one is five and one is seven. Even the teacher, who is told that they are named Dewey King, six years old and cousins, thinks she will have no problem telling them apart. They do not let her, however. They continue to remain a mystery of how they can all look so different, yet be as one.

Another tenant of Eva's is Tar Baby who comes to her house in 1921. Most people think he is half-white, but Eva says that he is all white. He stays to himself and at first has a steady job at the poultry market. At home, he drinks and sleeps. Eventually he loses his

job and then spends his days doing odd jobs enough to pay his rent. He is well known for his beautiful singing at the Wednesday night church meetings. Soon, Hannah realizes she need not worry about him because what he wants is a private place to let his self die. We also find out that he and the Deweys will be the first to join Shadrack on National Suicide Day.

Eva raises her children and Pearl marries and moves to Michigan. Hannah marries, but her husband dies when Sula is three years old. Hannah moves back in with her mother. Hannah and Eva love all men. Eva frequently has gentlemen guests, but just for gossiping and checkers. Hannah, on the other hand, keeps a steady stream of lovers. Because of this, many women dislike Hannah; men see her as kind and generous. Plum goes to war in 1917 and is never the same. He returns to the States in 1919, but does not go back home for another year. They all know something is wrong, and when he does return home, Eva gives him a room next to Tar Baby and waits for him to tell his story. Hannah discovers that he is using drugs.

Eva makes her way down to Plum's room one night in 1921. She sets down her crutches, sits on his bed and scoops him into her arms. She rocks him. She thinks back to all the happy times of Plum's childhood. She reaches for what she thinks is a glass of strawberry soda and takes a drink. She realizes it is blood-tainted water. After leaving the room, she returns and douses Plum with kerosene, lights a wad of newspaper and throws it on him. She closes the door and goes back to her room. Hannah runs up to tell her what is happening and that they cannot open the door. They share a look that tells Hannah exactly what has happened.

1921 Analysis

First, we meet Eva. She is a strong, street smart and popular woman. When life gets tough for her, she knows that she must step up to the plate and take action. She is also very powerful. Even though she sits lower in her wagon, and people physically look down on her, she has the power to make people look up to her and admire her. This power stems from her hatred towards her husband and funnels out into a life where she helps newlyweds, children and strays. It is as though she knows what it is like when life is rough and she made it through it, so now she can help others. She is always a mysterious woman and most, if not all, of the mystery stems from her missing leg. Her remaining leg is her icon for beauty, a symbol of what she will do for her family. It is always dressed to the prime and beautiful so people take notice and never forget the sacrifice she has made. Hannah takes after her mother with her sexual power, but in a different sense. Hannah is beautiful and sexy and men like her. They are attracted to her for both her looks and her actions and she sets an interesting example of love and intimacy for Sula.

This foreshadows future issues with her relationships with men. The house that Eva built is becoming a symbol their lives. It is physically disorganized and full of strays, addictions and death. We will soon see how that plays a role in Sula's life.

1922

1922 Summary

Sula and Nel have become fast friends despite their opposite upbringing. They like to walk to Edna Finch's Mellow House ice cream parlor past all the men and boys to see what they'll say and test their limits. They met in school, on the playground, and their opposite lives (appearance and personalities) gave them a sudden and intense relationship. Nel is light-skinned, strong and consistent. Sula is dark with unpredictable emotions.

Throughout their friendship, Sula emerges as the protector. A group of boys – sons of Irish immigrants – likes to pick on the black children and one day they choose to "rough" up Nel. She begins varying her route home and it soon becomes very elaborate. One day, Sula convinces her to take the short, direct route again. They approach the boys who get up and block the sidewalk. As they get closer, Sula pulls out one of her mother's paring knives. The boys laugh it off because they do not think Sula will be able to do anything with it. Sula then squats down and cuts off the tip of her finger. Then she says, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" The boys leave without another word.

Sula and Nel best like adventures and love to explore anything and everything. They spend their days together amazed at all the things they can observe. The newest "theme" of their interest is men. This is why they like to walk to the ice cream parlor – to "observe" all the men sitting there.

During the summer when they are twelve, Nel and Sula are heading to the river when Sula stops at her house to use the toilet. On her way in, she overhears her mother and her girlfriends talking about children. Hannah comments that she loves Sula, but does not like her.

They then run to the river and lay down under the shade of four trees. They lay there for a while playing in the grass and digging holes. Then a boy (Chicken Little) comes up, picking his nose. Nel teases him and says his Mamma told him to stop picking his nose. Sula defends him. She takes him to the top of one of the trees and shows him the view. When they get back down, Chicken is "elated" and cannot wait to tell his brother about where he had been. Then, Sula grabs his hand and starts swinging him around in circles. He slips from her hands and flies out into the water. He lands and the water closes over him and he does not reappear. The girls just stand and stare at the water until they briefly see a figure on the other side of the river – near Shadrack's house. They wonder if he had seen what happened. Sula runs to Shadrack's house. She is surprised at how neat and "normal" his cottage is. She tries to ask him if he had seen anything, but is unable to get the words out. He nods and says "Always." Sula runs back to Nel who attempts to comfort her.

A bargeman finds Chicken Little's body and it takes three days for it to make it back to the Bottoms due to the lack of respect for a Negro's body. Because of this, he was not recognizable, except for his clothes, and needed a closed casket funeral. As they bury Chicken Little, Nel and Sula know they will never forget his laughter or the feel of his hands.

1922 Analysis

We begin to see how Sula and Nel compliment one another. First, they are complete opposites in every aspect of their lives except that they like one another and adventures. When they are together, they seem to meld together as one. We begin to see their unique friendship unfold, but also begin to wonder at some strange behaviors such as when Chicken Little falls in the water, they just stand there.

Sula's unpredictable emotions can stem from her home life. There is not a whole lot of stability with the ins and outs of the constant stream of people. Even the home itself is unpredictable with its various rooms, door and staircases. Nel, on the other hand, comes from a stable, usual, strong home and is the "half" of the friendship that can stand solid and make decisions.

Two important events illustrate the beginning of abandonment in Sula's life. First, she finds out that she cannot trust her mother who loves her but does not "like" her. Second, she finds out that she cannot trust herself who could not hold on to Chicken Little.

1923

1923 Summary

Many strange things happen on this particular day in addition to a strange night before. There was a strong wind – the kind that usually brings rain, but this time it only brought a drier heat. The second one is Hannah going to her mother's room to ask if she really loved her children. Eva defends herself and her actions and says she loved and kept them alive – that should be enough. Hannah wonders why Eva killed Plum and Eva says it was to give him an honorable death as a "man" before he regressed any further back into childhood. Hannah leaves the room, heads to the kitchen and begins cleaning the beans for dinner. She sees the Deweys playing chain gang out the window with their laces all tied together. Then, she lies down and has a dream of a wedding in a red gown until Sula wakes her. The next day, Thursday, Hannah takes her mother some eggs (with no whites for luck) and tells her of the dream. Later, Eva remembers this as the third strange thing because the red had confused her. Sula is also acting up by fretting over the newlyweds that are currently living there and by tormenting the Deweys by threatening to give them a bath. By noon, Hannah is preparing to can, the newlyweds have taken off for the day and Sula and the Deweys are out of sight.

Eva looks out the window, sees Hannah building the fire and heads over to comb her hair. This is the next strange thing: she cannot find her comb and nobody ever touches her stuff. Finally, she finds it in her drawer and heads back to the window. It is then that she sees Hannah burning. Eva does the first thing that comes to her mind and jumps out the window to help her daughter. She misses Hannah and lands on the ground. Hannah darts from the yard. The neighbors see her coming and dump a tub of tomatoes and water on her. The water puts out the flames, but makes steam, which sears her. Someone calls an ambulance and both Hannah and Eva are sent to the hospital. Hannah dies while Eva lies on the stretcher on the floor. An orderly finally notices her bleeding and alerts a nurse. Eva credits him to saving her life. As she sits in the hospital, Eva thinks back on her poor judgment by not noticing all the signs. She also remembers seeing Sula on the porch watching her mamma burn. Everyone tells Eva that Sula probably was in shock, but, deep inside, Eva knows that Sula had watched because she was interested.

1923 Analysis

Death once again affects Sula's life (the second in the house and the fourth in her lifetime). This time she watches from the porch as her mother burns. The importance of this is that Eva sees Sula watching her mother burn and really learns about who her granddaughter is.

Eva and Hannah are very superstitious and take every precaution from interpreting dreams to eating only the yolks of eggs for good luck. It does not seem to help, though,

when Eva cannot put together all the strange things to help her save Hannah. She may even blame herself for Hannah's death.

1927

1927 Summary

Nel marries Jude Greene and it is a grand affair at her mother's house. Helene loosens her uptightness because she realizes that after the wedding, she will have years to clean up the mess. Jude Greene is well liked, a waiter at the Hotel Medallion and a singer in the men's choir. He is not planning on getting married until he realizes he is unable to get a job working on the new road connecting the Bottoms to the rest of Medallion: the gang boss always overlooks the black men trying to get jobs for the less qualified white men. Jude is disappointed because he wants to have a manlier role than just being a waiter. When he finally realizes it's impossible to get a job working on the road, he decides to pressure Nel to marry him so at least he can have that type of manly role and have someone other than his mother take care of him.

Sula and Nel have always been known to "be as one." Only with Sula does Nel show all the excitement and imagination that her parents squelch. Sula love the attention that Jude gives to Nel – she sees it as attention to herself as well. Sula also loves the idea of the wedding and helps Mrs. Wright plan it every step of the way. She even insists that she be the only bridesmaid. Towards the end of the wedding, Nel looks out and sees Sula leaving. We then find out that they do not see each other again for ten years.

1927 Analysis

We meet Jude, an overall nice guy but someone who needs to show his manliness. This is great foreshadowing that something will happen in the future. Jude and Nel are truly in love and even Sula sees this. She pushes for the wedding (which, in effect, is a breakup of their close friendship) and actually plans much of it – a curious action when we all know that a wedding will take from her the one solid aspect of her life: Nel. Overall, love takes over and causes the death (even if it is temporary) of Nel and Sula.

1937

1937 Summary

Sula returns to Medallion "accompanied by a plague of robins" and with a flourish. She has on fancy clothes that catch everyone's eye – even the white people. When she gets to Eva's room, Eva is immediately defensive and upset that Sula had not contacted her grandmother in ten years. They argue about many things including Eva burning Plum, Sula watching Hannah burn, Sula not settling down and how and why Eva had lost her leg. Sula threatens to sneak into the room and burn Eva just as Eva did Plum. Eva begins locking her door, but it does not stop Sula from having Eva committed and getting guardianship over her grandmother.

Nel notices a new spark and excitement in life after Sula returns to Medallion. She now can "see old things with new eyes." Sula stops by to visit one day and they tell stories and laugh as they have not in a quite a while. Then, Sula tells Nel that she had Eva committed to a nursing home and asks for help. Nel realizes that Sula is still unable to make important decisions for herself. Nel agrees to help Sula sort out things. When Jude gets home, he complains about his day. Sula tells him it a different way. Through her eyes and her telling, everything that everyone does is a sign that they love the Blackman. Jude is laughing by the end of the story and he realizes that she is funny and can stir a man's mind, "but not his body."

Later, Nel catches Jude having an affair with Sula. All he can do is get dressed and say he will be back for his things. Nel spends the summer avoiding her hurt, frustration and anger. Even though Jude left her for Sula, she finds herself wishing she still had Sula to help her through his time. Nel does not know what she is supposed to do with the emptiness for the rest of her life.

1937 Analysis

Sula has been gone and returns with a flourish. Her return brings a plague on the Bottom in more than one way. The birds arrive and are a huge nuisance and she causes more abandonment when she and Jude have their affair. Nel just cannot believe that she has lost her husband and her best friend in one instant. Nel loses some of her even, logical thinking after the affair. She spends time avoiding her emotions and begins wondering how she will fill the void.

Sula has not really changed in the past ten years; everything has just intensified. She is a ball of fire waiting to explode and will take out anything in her way: even Eva. At this point, we don't know what causes the rift between them, but speculation can tell you that is has much more to do with Sula's need for independence (and perhaps her desire to protect herself from abandonment) than anything Eva had done.

1939

1939 Summary

As soon as people hear about what Sula had done to Eva, Nel and Jude, the nasty comments and rumors begin flying. They begin talking about how Sula had watched her mother burn and started talk that she sleeps with white men. They view her as evil and take precaution to protect themselves, watching her closely. Because of this, things change at the Bottom:

Teapot, a neglected five-year-old boy knocks on Sula's door and asks her for bottles. As he leaves, he falls down the steps and Sula goes out to help him. Teapot's mamma only sees Sula leaning over her boy and starts the story that she had pushed him. She ends up taking Teapot to the hospital to find he has broken bones. Because she does not like the idea that a woman may have hurt her child, she becomes a very devoted and loving mother. In another instance, Mr. Finley, who is known for sucking on chicken bones on his porch, looks up and chokes to death when he sees Sula. Overall, people began being more loyal and loving to their loved ones.

One of the reasons Sula and Hannah are viewed differently among the women is their attitude towards men. Sula could have a man only once. Hannah would continually have and want a man – strangely, a compliment to their wives.

Finally, people begin noticing very interesting things about Sula: she has never had any childhood illnesses, she has all of her teeth, she has no bruises or scars and she is never bothered by gnats or mosquitoes. Above all, Shadrack, who is not civil to anyone, "tips his hat" to Sula on the street.

While all the evidence to see Sula as a devilish, evil being is contrived, it does prove her independence, arrogance and self-indulgence – a perfect mix of her grandmother and mother. She is a person who feels no obligation towards anyone else unless "their pleasure [pleases] her." She still struggles with the loss of a "center" based on her mother's comments about not "liking" her and the fact that she lost her responsibility when "caring" for Chicken Little. She could no longer rely on others or herself.

Sula had always seen Nel as the one solid thing in her life and had always seen them as one. To her dismay, she realizes they are no longer one. All their lives they had shared everything, including boyfriends. Sula did not know that this does not carry on through marriage. Nel had meant everything to her and new Nel is one of the "others" who see Sula as a roach. Nel had been one of the reasons Sula returned to Medallion and now she is saddened to have lost her.

Sula has a difficult time at home. One of the reasons is she cannot lie – the only lie she told in her life was to Nel about why she put out Eva. Sula also knows that the women hate her because she goes "to bed with men as frequently as she [can]." She thinks of

sex as a wicked, personal act that is purely for her. She does not think she will ever change her view about sex until Ajax comes to her door. Ajax was one of the young men she and Nel would see when they would walk to the ice cream parlor as young girls. He brings her milk bottles the first time and then begins coming regularly. Although he does not give the impression in public, he really is a gentleman to the women he "courts." He is always bringing gifts and surprises. Sula likes the gifts he brings, but also likes the fact that they talk and have real conversations. Sula knows Ajax is not an ordinary guy when one morning she begins to wonder if he will come that night. One day she puts a green bow in her hair, shines the bathroom where he likes to take baths, makes the bed and sets the table. They talk and he tells Sula how Tar Baby had been arrested for causing an accident. As they talk, Ajax notices the ribbon, table, bathroom and clean sheets. He realizes what is happening to Sula. After that night, he leaves for Dayton.

Sula begins to realize what it means to want to possess someone. She tries to find tangible proof that he had actually been there. One day, she finds his driver's license and realizes his name is not Ajax, but A. Jacks. She realizes that she did not even know the name of the man with which she had spent so much time.

1939 Analysis

The house is very important in this chapter. Sula has taken the house that Eva built and changed it. She has removed all of the strays and as many of the extra people as she can (Tar Baby and the deweys are still there). She has removed much of the chaos and lives there alone. The physical skeleton of the house is still there, but the heart and soul that Eva brought to it are gone. Sula is doing everything she can to remove every aspect of Eva from the house and, consequently, her life.

The people in her neighborhood think she is a witch and begin protecting their selves. The irony is that her presence has caused them to better their lives and relationships. Even further irony is that Sula is emotionally unable to cultivate any relationships of her own. Her whole life had been spent seeing her mother and grandmother sift through men without much commitment and Sula tries doing the same. She takes what she wants and leaves the rest. Until Ajax arrives, she does not understand the concept of relationships being a two way street. She does not even understand why Nel's husband was off limits since before Nel married, the two of them shared everything!

There is an overall change in Sula in this chapter. We see her with contempt and even dislike as we see how she treats the people in her life. It is ironic that she tries to live the same life as her mother and grandmother but is not able to pull it off – people hate her with a passion. Towards the end, however, we can gain a little more sympathy for her when she finally finds something she wants and she cannot get it – i.e. Ajax.

1940

1940 Summary

Nel visits Sula for the first time in three years. She practices asking Sula if there is anything she can do because Sula is sick. She is sure to make her question level and cordial. She does not want to betray any of the range of emotions she still feels towards Sula from the affair, how it had changed her love for her children or how she feels about working at the hotel as a chambermaid.

Sula asks Nel to get her prescription filled – the pain relievers the doctor had told her to hold off on until the pain is "really bad." Sula wonders why Nel had stopped by her house. She is happy, however, that Nel, who always came through during the crises in her life will bring her new medicine.

When Nel returns, she and Sula have a discussion based around their friendship and where they each ended up in life. Nel tells Sula that she should not stay in the house alone and Sula says she will be fine because she is comfortable there. Nel confronts Sula about always taking what she wants and leaving what she does not. Sula strongly defends herself saying she may be "going down" but she is going down having lived a full life. Nel asks Sula why she "did it." Sula says Jude just "filled a space" for her. Nel is even more crushed that Sula did not love Jude. Nel wants to know why Sula did not consider her feelings before the affair and Sula simply replies if they really had been such good friends then Nel should have been able to get over it. After the discussion, Nel is disappointed and irritated. She leaves and tells Sula she probably will not be back.

After Nel leaves, Sula thinks back on her life. She has a dream about the Baking Powder Lady who turns to dust as Sula approaches her. As she is thinking, she curls up and closes her eyes. She realizes she is not breathing and keeps waiting for the "explosion," but soon understands there is no pain in death. She feels herself smiling and cannot wait to tell Nel.

1940 Analysis

Once again, Eva's house is a house of death when Sula dies. At this point, Sula has completely succeeds in changing it from bustling, active and chaotic to quiet and lonely. As Nel and Sula discuss their friendship, we finally see them separate into individuals for the last time. This discussion is needed for complete closure on their relationship before she dies. Nel has a changing view of their relationship in the fact that she had set up boundaries the she feels no friend should ever cross and Sula was unable to see outside of their previous, childhood friendship that all actions are forgivable. After all is said and done, Sula still sees Nel as a friend and wants to share everything with her –

we know this in how she can't wait to tell Nel what it feels like to die – another adventure for her. It is as though Sula never grew out of her childhood adventurous stage.

1941

1941 Summary

Many people attend Sula's funeral – some to see for sure that the "witch" is buried, others to make sure everything goes smoothly. The people of the Bottom notice that things in general seem to get better after Sula's death. There is a promise of work on the new tunnel and the retirement home gets renovations. Eva and the other colored women can now occupy it. The people of the Bottom begin seeing new hope.

Things change, however, that fall when rain falls and freezes turning Medallion "silver." The ice covering causes much hardship from not being able to harvest late crops to cider barrels bursting to women not being able to make it to town to work. People just do not leave their houses. They have an awful Thanksgiving and the cold causes a plethora of illness throughout. People start reverting to their old ways from before Sula's return. For example, Teapot's mother beats him again. Christmas is also horrid and miserable between the cold and the illness.

The new year starts with warm weather and sunny days. Shadrack has been feeling different lately, lonely. He still recalls Sula as a child in his cottage and fondly refers to her as his only visitor ever. She had dropped her belt and he has kept it as a reminder of her visit. Then, he sees that she had died and now is lonely. He does not necessarily want to keep up his Suicide Day March, but feels he must. When people see him coming on such a welcoming, warm, sunny day, they begin following him. They eventually get to the tunnel and begin destroying it and its supplies. Eventually, some people enter it and the tunnel gives way on the newly melting earth. Tar Baby and the Deweys, among others, die in the tunnel as Shadrack stands ringing his bell.

1941 Analysis

The tunnel is a symbol of the end of the Bottom. After the war, people began moving out of the Bottom to get closer to the valley, but the end happened before that. The tunnel and new road were always sore spots for the people of the Bottom who were unable to get jobs helping. In the end, the tunnel's destruction also brought destruction to the people of the Bottom in the forms of deaths. The death of Tar Baby and the deweys mean that everyone and everything that Eva strived to build and help are now gone, there is nothing left but herself.

Shadrack is finally beginning to get over his fears caused by the war. He does not want to observe this coming National Suicide Day, but feels he must. The irony is that it brings about more unexpected and unwanted death – the exact fears National Suicide Day is supposed to help prevent.

1965

1965 Summary

Nel is amazed at how things have changed: many colored people have jobs in town and the "whores" are no longer proud of themselves. The Bottom is changing because after the war, people moved out of the Bottom and closer to the valley. Now, the white people are building big houses in the hills. Nel walks though town (still a pedestrian as often as possible) towards the newest nursing home to visit the nine colored women who reside there (including Eva). When she gets there, Eva remembers who Nel is and Nel is immediately taken aback and saddened that Eva's grand, remaining foot is stuffed into a slipper instead on an eloquent shoe. Eva becomes agitated and accuses Nel of murdering Chicken Little. Nel thinks that Eva is confusing her and Sula, but Eva says, "there never was no difference between [them]." Eva says that because Nel had watched the murder, she was just as guilty.

Nel is so upset by Eva's accusations that she leaves the nursing home without visiting the other ladies and walks home. As she walks, she thinks about what Eva had said and realized that Eva had said she "watched", not just saw, but watched, it happen. Nel also realizes that she did not feel bad when it happened; in fact, it had felt good to see him fall.

Nel had always had good feeling toward Eva, but now she saw her for what she really was: evil and spiteful. She thinks about the spite that the people of the Bottom had felt when Sula had died. Nobody did a thing about her death until Nel called the police and the hospital. Eventually, the white people had to take care of all her arrangements. After visiting the cemetery on the way home, Nel realizes that she had not felt pain all these years for losing Jude, but for losing Sula.

1965 Analysis

Nel comes full circle when she meets with Eva and finally is able to close all the lose ends hanging in her life. She realizes that all these years she really was not that different from Sula and that she is not any better than Sula or anyone else. She had done nothing to help Chicken Little and instead, just watched. She also realizes that Sula was right. If they really had had such a great friendship, Nel should have been able to forgive Sula for the affair. We also learn a lot about Eva in this chapter. She is truly powerful and maybe the "evil" one as she knows things she does not really have a way of knowing (such as Chicken Little).

Characters

BoyBoy

BoyBoy is Eva Peace's husband, who gives her three children, Hannah, Eva (called Pearl), and Ralph (who is called Plum), then disappears. During the time they are together, he is largely preoccupied with other women and drinking, and is rarely home. When he leaves, Eva has "$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel." He returns three years later with a new woman, apparently having heard of Eva's new wealth and seemingly hoping for a handout, but Eva doesn't give him anything, and he disappears again.

Chicken Little

Chicken Little is a small boy who comes to play with Sula and Nel at the river. Sula picks him up and swings him around, and accidentally throws him in the river, where he drowns. His body is found downstream by a white man, who is annoyed at having to deal with it, and after the bargeman, the sheriff, and a ferryman bicker over whose responsibility it is to return to the body to the child's family, it is finally taken to the embalmer four days later.

The Deweys

The Deweys are three little boys whom Eva takes in. Regardless of their original names, she calls them all "Dewey," last name "King," and they're collectively known as "The deweys." Although they look different from each other and come from different families, their individuality is gradually subsumed in their collective identity as "deweys," to the point where they never really grow up, and Morrison writes, "The deweys remained a mystery not only during all of their lives in Medallion but after as well."

Albert Jacks

A. Jacks, or "Ajax" as he's known to everyone, is "a twenty-one-year-old pool haunt of sinister beauty." He is a favorite among women and an accomplished swearer and curser. He advises Jude about women, "All they want, man, is they own misery. Ax them to die for you and they yours for life." Later, when he's thirty-eight and Sula is twenty-nine, they become lovers. She falls in love with him, but Ajax, feeling trapped, leaves her.

Eva Peace

Although Eva is Sula's grandmother, she outlives her granddaughter, and is present during all the events of the novel. She leaves her mark on Sula, helping to shape her character.

Eva is abandoned by her husband while she is still a young mother, and, faced with the problem of supporting her family without resorting to charity, she leaves her children with a friend, saying she'll be gone overnight. She returns eighteen months later on crutches, with one leg missing, but then begins receiving a series of regular checks in the mail. Although she is mysterious about what happened to her leg, the other characters assume that she allowed a train to run over it and cut it off so that she could collect the insurance money. She doesn't let her lack of a leg interfere with her enjoyment of life, or her enjoyment of men; she is famed for her gentlemen callers□although she never makes love with them□and for the fact that her remaining leg, still shapely, is "stockinged and shod at all times." She lives in a huge, rambling house with many rooms and passageways, takes in boarders□some paying, some not□and spends most of her time high up in the house, watching over the assortment of people in it. These include three boys, all of whom she has named "Dewey."

Everyone in the community admires Eva, despite her nontraditional life. Sula is the one person who does not admire her, however, and when Eva jumps from the second story of the house in order to save Hannah, Sula's mother, who is burning to death, Sula doesn't help either her mother or her grandmother. Later, Sula puts Eva in a nursing home.

Eva is a tough woman, a survivor, who is often brutally honest. Near the end of the book, she is visited by Sula's friend Nel, and reminds Nel that Nel, like Sula, was involved in Chicken Little's death; in the end, she forces Nel to contemplate about her and Sula's likeness.

Eva Peace II

Eva, known as Pearl, is Hannah's sister and Sula's aunt. She marries at fourteen, moves to Flint, Michigan, and writes occasional sad letters to her mother about minor troubles.

Hannah Peace

Hannah is Sula's mother. She married "a laughing man named Rekus" who died when Sula was three; after this, Hannah moves back into Eva Peace's big house, "prepared to take care of it and her mother forever." Like Eva, Hannah loves men, and has a steady stream of lovers, most of whom are married to her friends or neighbors. However, despite her promiscuity, she is leery of trusting anyone or becoming committed to anyone. Hannah is disliked by the "good" women in town, who find her

morally reprehensible; by the prostitutes, who resent her for cutting into their business by giving her services away; and also by the "middling women" who have both husbands and affairs, because her lack of passion about her affairs seems strange and alien to them. Hannah is similarly detached from her own daughter, Sula; she loves Sula, but says she doesn't like her.

Ralph Peace

Ralph, known as Plum, is Eva's youngest child, and the one "to whom she hoped to bequeath everything." He goes off to fight in World War I and, like Shadrack, comes home damaged; he has become a heroin addict. When he finally returns to Medallion, his hair is uncombed and uncut, his clothes are dirty, and he is not wearing socks. "But he did have a black bag, a paper sack, and a sweet, sweet smile." He moves back into Eva's house, where he seldom eats or talks to anyone. When Eva realizes that he is an addict, she pours kerosene over him, sets him on fire, and kills him. High on the drug, Plum is unaware of what she's doing.

Sula Peace

Toni Morrison wrote in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*,

I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding intuitively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female.

Sula, as Morrison notes, is a dark character, not simply because of the color of her skin, but in terms of her soul. She is a strange child, defiant and different from other children. Although this difference seems innate in her, it is exacerbated by two occurrences in her childhood: one when she overhears her mother saying she loves Sula, but doesn't like her, and another when she is inadvertently responsible for the death of a little boy called Chicken Little. As a result of these events, Sula feels unloved and burdened by guilt.

Sula's mother, Hannah, values her independence from others, and Sula follows in her footsteps. The two times that she has a relationship and violates her rule of separateness, she is devastated. She falls in love once, with Ajax, and becomes so obsessed with him that he's frightened away, leaving her miserable.

More long-lasting is Sula's relationship with her best friend, Nel, who is from a very different background and has a very different personality. The two balance each other, and Sula is deeply attached to Nel. After Nel's wedding to a man named Jude, she

leaves her hometown of Medallion for ten years. When she comes back, she's changed: she now has a college education and wears expensive clothes. These changes only make the townspeople, who have always regarded her as strange, feel even more alienated from her, to the point where whenever anything bad happens in the town, Sula is blamed.

She also puts her grandmother, Eva, in a nursing home, leading the town to further reject her. A year later, she is very sick with an unspecified but very painful illness. On her deathbed, she thinks about her alienation from all the people she's known: "The deweys, Tar Baby, the newly married couples, Mr. Buckland Reed, Patsy, Valentine, and the beautiful Hannah Peace. Where were they?" She has lost track of them all, and now she lies alone, "upstairs in Eva's bed with a boarded-up window and an empty pocketbook on the dresser." Even Nel, who has visited her and gotten a painkiller for her, has left and closed the door. Sula thinks about Nel:

So she will walk on down that road, her back so
straight in that old green coat, the strap of her handbag
pushed back all the way to the elbow, thinking
how much I have cost her and never remember the
days when we were two throats and one eye and we
had no price.

She feels that their old, deep kinship is gone, like her connections to the other people she remembers.

She also thinks of life with a sense of futility: "Nothing was ever different. They were all the same. All of the words and all of the smiles, every tear and every gag just something to do." And in the end, just before she dies, she is comforted by the boarded-up window that Eva jumped out of: "The sealed window soothed her with its sturdy termination, its unassailable finality. It was as though for the first time she was completely alone—where she had always wanted to be—free of the possibility of distraction."

However, after she dies, the first thing she thinks is, "It didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel," showing that despite her feeling of alienation, their friendship is deeper than she realized, continuing on past death.

On her deathbed, she thinks about her mother's comments about her, and about Chicken Little's death, and decides that she has lived a meaningless life.

Later in the book, when her mother's dress catches on fire, Sula watches with calm detachment as her mother is fatally burned. Although some of Eva's friends later rationalize her calm watching as the result of being "struck dumb" with shock, Eva "remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested."

Pearl

See Eva Peace II

Plum

See Ralph Peace

Cecile Sabat

Cecile is Helene Sabat Wright's grandmother. She takes Helene away from her prostitute mother and raises her in a strict Catholic household.

Rochelle Sabat

Rochelle is Helene's mother. She sees Helene for the first time in sixteen years when Helene's grandmother, Cecile, dies and Helene returns to New Orleans for the funeral. The two look at each other with no recognition or warmth, and similarly, Rochelle is not warm to Nel, her own granddaughter. She is still vibrant and young-looking, and wears a canary-yellow dress and fragrant perfume. Nel is fascinated by her, but Helene is only too eager to get back to Medallion; she has made a break with her past, and she refuses to speak Creole, as Rochelle does, or to teach it to Nel.

Shadrack

Shadrack is shell-shocked from his participation in World War I, and after being released from a veteran's hospital, is arrested by police who assume he's drunk, then released. He drinks to medicate his mental turmoil, and lives in a shack near the river. He is famous in the Bottom as the inventor of "National Suicide Day," which he celebrates every January 3rd, leading a parade through town that most people avoid. Despite this, the holiday becomes part of the town's consciousness, so that people will date events by whether they occurred after or before a particular Suicide Day.

The only person who ever enters Shadrack's cabin is Sula, who runs there to see if Shadrack has seen her accidentally throw Chicken Little into the river and drown him. Shadrack doesn't give her a chance to ask her question, and simply says "always," which Sula perceives as a threat. However, because she is the only person who has ever visited him, Shadrack views her as his friend for the rest of his life. She has no idea that her life has given a sense of love and meaning to Shadrack. After Sula dies, he loses interest in his invented holiday, "National Suicide Day," and has to force himself to go, but the townspeople, who are depressed from the sudden downward turn of events following Sula's death, eagerly join the parade. The ensuing mob heads toward a half-finished tunnel that is being built mostly by white people, and, filled with hatred for the

whites, they begin destroying it. They do so much damage that the tunnel caves in, killing the people inside it, while Shadrack stands on a hill above this scene of mass destruction (and inadvertent mass suicide) ringing a bell.

Tar Baby

Tar Baby is one of the boarders in Eva's house, "a beautiful, slight, quiet man who never spoke above a whisper." Most people think he is halfwhite, but Eva thinks he is totally white, and calls him Tar Baby as a joke. He lives simply, and when he loses his job, he scrounges around for odd jobs, buys liquor, and comes home to drink, but he is no trouble to anyone. Eventually it becomes clear that he simply wants a place to die, privately, but not entirely alone.

Helene Wright

Helene Sabat, born in a brothel in New Orleans to a Creole prostitute, was taken away from her original home as a baby, and raised by her grandmother, who told her to be on guard for any evidence of her mother's "wild blood" and brought her up in a strict Catholic household. Helene marries Wiley Wright, and despite his frequent and long absences, is delighted when she has a daughter, Nel, whom she raises as strictly as her grandmother raised her; however, because there is no Catholic church in Medallion, she joins the most conservative black church instead. Helene is famed in Medallion as an impressive, upstanding woman, a pillar of her church. The only battle she loses is over her name; the townspeople, who refuse to say "Helene," simply call her "Helen."

Nel Wright

An only child, Nel is brought up in a strict, quiet, orderly house, but she longs for excitement, variety, and adventure. She finds them in the company of Sula, her best friend. Although Nel has been brought up in a strict and orderly household□ or because of her upbringing there□she hates the "oppressive neatness" of her mother's house and loves "Sula's woolly house," where something is always cooking on the stove, Sula's mother never scolds or tells her what to do, there's a constant chaos of people stopping in, and where one-legged Eva presides, handing out peanuts and telling her dreams.

The two of them are inseparable, each finding something in the other to fill a hole in her own life. Morrison writes that Nel's parents "had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had." Only with Sula did that quality have free reign, but their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's. They are also bound together at a young age by their shared knowledge of exactly how Chicken Little drowned.

Eva grows up to be a traditional, quiet, "good" woman; she has a big wedding, to her mother's delight, has three children, and plans to have a quiet, orderly life. This plan is destroyed when she finds her husband and Sula having an affair.

When Sula is dying, Nel visits her for the first time in three years, since Sula's affair with Jude. They are uneasy with each other but pick up the relationship where it left off. Nel tells Sula she should be with someone who can take care of her, but Sula refuses. Nel is also offended by Sula's arrogant talk about how she doesn't need any man, never would have worked for anyone else, and doesn't need anyone now. She asks Sula why she had an affair with Jude, and Sula says it was just because Jude filled up a space in her life; Nel is hurt that she, as Sula's friend, didn't count to fill up any space. She can't get a straight answer from Sula about what their friendship meant to Sula, and realizes, "She can't give a sensible answer because she didn't know." The last thing Sula asks her is, "About who was good. How did you know it was you?" calling into question her identity as a "good" girl and a "good" woman. After Sula dies, however, the first thing Sula thinks is "Wait'll I tell Nel," showing that their friendship has endured past these difficulties, past death.

Themes

Poverty and Hopelessness

Throughout the novel, the lives of the characters are shaped by poverty, as they have little or no money, unlike many of their white counterparts in the town. Although no one in the book is rich, the people of the Bottom are exceptionally poor. Eva has money only because she sacrificed her leg; others must make do as they can, with menial jobs or no jobs, because work for African Americans is limited by the racism of those who could hire them. When characters have dreams, like Jude, who dreams of doing a man's work on the road crew instead of spending a menial day as a waiter, they are crushed.

Existence in the Bottom is precarious at best, and is easily disrupted. Near the end of the book, people's hopes are raised by rumors that the new tunnel construction would use African-American laborers, and by the fact that an old people's home that was being renovated would be open to African Americans. However, these hopes are forgotten when a freezing rain kills all the late crops, kills chickens, splits jugs of cider, and makes the "thin houses and thinner clothes" of the Bottom people seem even thinner. Housebound, they make do with what they have, since deliveries have stopped and the good food is all being saved for white customers anyway. Thanksgiving that year is a meal of "tiny tough birds, heavy pork cakes, and pithy sweet potatoes." By spring all the children are sick and the adults are suffering from a variety of ailments.

All this suffering and malaise is accompanied by "a falling away, a dislocation." Mothers slap their children and resent the old people they have to take care of, wives and husbands become alienated from each other, and people begin bickering about small things. Christmas that year is a misery because of the sickness, lack of good food, and absence of money for gifts. The only gifts they can get are bags of rock candy and old clothes, given away by white people.

This feeling of doom and hopelessness leads almost everyone in town to participate in that year's celebration of National Suicide Day, with a feeling of reckless abandon at the idea of "looking at death in the sunshine and being unafraid," as well as the feeling of "this respite from anxiety, from dignity, from gravity, from the weight of the very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before . . . as though there really was hope." This is the same hope that has kept them laboring in white men's beanfields in hopes of bettering themselves, fighting in other people's wars, kept them solicitous of white people's children, "kept them convinced that some magic 'government' was going to lift them up, out and away from that dirt, those beans, those wars." In other words, it's a futile and misguided hope.

Caught up in the energy of the moment, seeking release, the crowd of people pours on down the New River Road toward the tunnel, where they see "the place where their hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise: leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-

stuffed mattresses . . . the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers." They try to destroy the tunnel, but in their desire to destroy it, they enter it and ultimately destroy themselves when the tunnel collapses under their attack.

Good and Evil

A major theme running through the book is good versus evil, and the fact that what people think is evil may be good, and vice versa. Shadrack, who appears in the first chapter, is considered dangerous and evil by the townspeople, and when he says "Always" to Sula, she takes it as a threat. However, he is not evil, he is simply shell-shocked and misunderstood; throughout the book, he never harms anyone. Sula is also considered evil, especially in the second half of the book, and Nel is considered good, but by the end of the book, Nel realizes that she has evil thoughts and has done evil things, while Sula has inspired the most good acts that the town has ever seen.

Eva, Sula's grandmother, is considered good, respectable, and a pillar of the community, but actually has a darker side. Her ruthlessness is hinted at by the rumor that she arranged to have own her leg cut off, a scene that is reflected by Sula when she cuts off the tip of her own finger to frighten off some harassing white boys. If she's able to do that to herself, she tells them, they should just think about what she'd be able to do to them. Sula's minor act of self-mutilation pales in comparison with Eva's, and the unspoken question the book asks is, "If she's able to do that to herself, what would she be willing to do to someone else?" The answer is, "Anything and everything," including killing her own son by pouring kerosene over him and setting him on fire while he's in a drug-induced haze.

Racism

The novel explores the relationship between the races, which is marred by racism and bigotry. In the opening scene, the founding of the Bottom is described; according to local legend, the area became the property of African Americans when a white man deceived a slave into thinking the high, dry, and eroded land was good for farming because it was the "bottom" of heaven. When Chicken Little is drowned, his body is found by a white man, who has no compassion for the dead child or his family, but who is merely annoyed at having to deal with the mess. On the train south, Helene and Nel experience degrading treatment at the hands of the white conductor and the white-run train system, which does not provide restrooms for African Americans. When Jude tries to get a job with the road-building crew, he is denied one, although the company hires scrawny whites who obviously can't do as good a job as he can; he can only get a job as a waiter, which he feels is servile and degrading. When Sula returns to town after a ten-year absence, her erratic behavior causes the townspeople to spread rumors about her causing all of their misfortunes, and the most damning rumor about her is that she willingly sleeps with white men.

Mothers and Daughters

Throughout the book, the many motherdaughter pairs have strained, unhappy relationships, and the lack of love a mother has for her daughter is passed on through the generations. In Nel's family, her grandmother, Cecile, disapproved of Rochelle, her prostitute daughter, and took Helene, Rochelle's daughter, away from Rochelle. Rochelle and Helene don't even know each other and are as alienated as Rochelle was from her mother. Nel, Helene's daughter, who is similarly alienated from Nel, feels oppressed by her mother's strictness and propriety, and feels stifled in her quiet, orderly house.

Eva, Hannah's mother, is an outwardly upstanding and secretly ruthless woman, and it's clear that her daughter, Hannah, didn't feel loved by her. At one point, she even asks Eva if she loved her children, a question that makes Eva angry. Hannah is also ambivalent about her daughter, Sula; Sula overhears her telling some friends that although she loves Sula, she doesn't like her, a comment that deeply wounds Sula. Because of this, Sula grows up feeling unloved and left out.

BOOKRAGS

Style

Point of View

The novel is told from the point of view of a wise, omniscient narrator, who sees into all the characters' hearts and minds with tolerance and acceptance. The use of such a narrator is interesting; the characters are all given equal time, and no one, even Sula□for whom the book is named□is more major than anyone else. In addition, the use of varied points of view allows the reader to see all the sides of any event and understand the complexity of what really happened. In the book, horrendous events are depicted, but the narrator avoids making judgments about them; they are simply presented, and the reader sees various characters respond to them and is allowed to come to an independent determination of what these things mean and whether they are good or evil.

Realistic Dialogue

The author frequently uses dialect speech, bringing the characters to life and letting the reader hear them talk, in a very natural way. For example, in the following dialogue between Eva and Hannah, Hannah has just asked Eva if she loved her children and played with them when they were little, and Eva deflects the question by telling her about the hard times she went through:

"I'm talkin' 'bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house
five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three
beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy. What would
I look like leapin' 'round that little old room playin'
with youngins with three beets to my name?"

"I know 'bout them beets, Mamma. You told us that a million times."

"Yeah? Well? Don't that count? Ain't that love? You
want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget 'bout
them sores in your mouth?"

By using dialect speech, Morrison allows us to hear the characters as real people, and shows their social class, education, and attitudes without having to explicitly discuss these aspects. We know from their talk that the characters are African American, poor, and most likely rural. They express themselves directly, with no social posturing or pretension; their speech is vigorous and active, full of energy and passion.

Although white people rarely appear in the novel, when they do, they also speak in dialect. In the case of the conductor on the train to the south, it's southern: he asks Helene, "What was you doin' back in there? What was you doin' in that coach yonder?" When she tells him she made a mistake and got in the white car by accident, he says,

"We don't 'low no mistakes on this train. Now git your butt on in there." His dialect talk makes him seem uneducated and harsh at the same time that it underlines his similarity to the African Americans he despises, since the things he says, and the way he says them, could easily have been said by anyone in the Bottom in the same way. This similarity provides a subtle commentary on the misguided nature of racism, which erects artificial boundaries between people. He thinks he's "better" than the people in the "colored" car, but he is not as different from them as he'd like to believe.

Use of a Prologue

Sula, like many other novels, but unlike any of Morrison's other works, has a prologue that describes the Bottom and its origin, and makes the reader aware that this is a book about African- American people, set in an African-American settlement. In a discussion about the book in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, Morrison noted that her original beginning simply began, "Except for World War II nothing ever interfered with National Suicide Day." After getting some feedback about the book from others, she realized that this was too sudden a beginning, and that it didn't make clear to the reader where the book was set or what was going on. She thought of the prologue as a "safe, welcoming lobby," and believed it was necessary to make readers comfortable in her African-American world before they could move on with the story. She said that she would not need this "lobby" now, and indeed, none of her other books have this "lobby" ; they refuse, she said, "to cater to the diminished expectations of the reader or his or her alarm heightened by the emotional luggage one carries into the black-topic text." She also said, "I despise much of this beginning," and noted that her other books "refuse the 'presentation'; refuse the seductive safe harbor; the line of demarcation between . . . them and us."

Historical Context

African Americans in World War I

When the events of the book open, in 1919, veterans like Shadrack and Plum are returning from service overseas. Like Shadrack and Plum, many of them were emotionally and physically scarred from the experience of war, but African-American veterans did not receive as much respect for their service as their white counterparts. In the book, Shadrack is discharged from the hospital because there's no more room, and when he hits the streets, whites assume he's drunk, and he's arrested and taken to jail. All he has to show for his service is "$217 in cash, a full suit of clothes and copies of very official-looking papers."

During the war, more than 350,000 African- American soldiers served in segregated units. When they returned, many began working for civil rights, reasoning that if they were considered good enough to fight and risk their lives for their country, they should be given full participation in society. Both African Americans and whites joined the newly formed NAACP to fight discrimination and segregation, but it would be many years before segregation laws would be overturned.

African Americans had only recently been given the right to vote in the United States. Although they had supposedly held this right for much longer, various loopholes in the law ensured that few did. One law stated that an African-American man could vote only if his grandfather had. Poll taxes, literacy tests, voting fraud, violence against those who voted, and intimidation also kept people away from the ballot box. The NAACP fought successfully against the "grandfather clause," and it was overturned in 1915, but some of the other blocks to voting remained for many years.

The Great Depression

In 1929, the stock market crashed, leading to widespread depression and deep poverty. Skilled and unskilled, African-American and white, few people escaped the suffering involved. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected in 1932, he presented "New Deal" programs that would help housing, agriculture, and economic interests. Although African Americans had fewer opportunities than whites to benefit from the New Deal programs, they did participate in some of them.

Segregation

Through laws known as "Jim Crow" laws, Southern states were forcefully segregated, with separate facilities for travel, overnight lodging, eating, drinking, school, church, housing, and other services for African Americans and whites. These facilities were separate, and many times not equal; those for African Americans were frequently

substandard or nonexistent. If an African American failed to obey the segregation laws, he or she could be arrested and imprisoned.

World War II and the Civil Rights Movement

Many African Americans served in World War II, and like those who served in World War I, returned home and were outraged that they could serve their country but yet not have equal rights in it. The civil rights movement grew with protests, nonviolent resistance, boycotts, and rallies, which received increasing attention in the national media. In addition, activists challenged the segregation laws in court. In 1948, President Harry Truman eliminated segregation in the United States armed forces. Through other battles, segregation in other areas of life, such as on buses and in schools, was attacked and outlawed, although racist incidents continued to cause trouble for African Americans, and other areas of life were not yet integrated.

In 1963, more than 200,000 people joined the March on Washington, calling national attention to the problems of segregation and discrimination. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his famed "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for racial equality.

In 1965, the Voting Rights Act finally outlawed the use of literacy tests and other methods to exclude African Americans from voting. Before this law, only about twenty-three percent of African Americans were registered to vote, but after it, registration jumped to sixty-one percent.

The Civil Rights Act of 1968, known as the Fair Housing Act, more forcefully ensured that African Americans were legally entitled to all the rights that went with full citizenship in the United States.

Critical Overview

As Paul Gray noted in *Time*, some reviewers have found Morrison's work "overly deterministic, her characters pawns in the service of their creator's designs." He quoted essayist Stanley Crouch, who commented that Morrison was "immensely talented. I just think she needs a new subject matter, the world she lives in, not this world of endless black victims." However, Gray also noted: "For every pan, Morrison has received a surfeit of paeans: for her lyricism, for her ability to turn the mundane into the magical."

In the *New York Times Book Review*, Sara Blackburn commented that *Sula* was "a more precise yet somehow icy version of [Morrison's first novel] *The Bluest Eye*," and that "it refuses to invade our present in the way we want it to and stays, instead, confined to its time and place." Although, as Blackburn noted, Morrison's dialogue is "so compressed and lifelike that it sizzles" and her characterization is so skillful that the people in the book "seem almost mythologically strong and familiar," somehow "we can't imagine their surviving outside the tiny community where they carry on their separate lives." Because of this, she wrote, the novel's "long-range impact doesn't sustain the quality of its first reading." Blackburn also commented that Morrison was too talented to continue writing about "the black side of provincial American life" and that if she wanted to maintain a "large and serious audience," she would have to address a "riskier contemporary reality."

In addition, interestingly, Blackburn confessed that she, like other reviewers, might have given Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, more attention than it might have deserved. "Socially conscious readers□including myself□were so pleased to see a new writer of Morrison's obvious talent that we tended to celebrate the book and ignore its flaws." Presumably, she did not do this for *Sula*.

In the *Journal of Black Studies*, Marie Nigro wrote that the book is "an unforgettable story of the friendship of two African-American woman and . . . graciously allowed us to enter the community of the Bottom." By writing the book, Morrison "has given us an understanding of social, psychological, and sociological issues that might have been evident only to African Americans."

Jane S. Bakerman, in *American Literature*, wrote that "Morrison has undertaken a difficult task in *Sula*. Unquestionably, she has succeeded." She also praised Morrison's use of the tale of Sula and Nel's maturation as a core for the many other stories in the book, and said that as the main unifying device of the novel, "It achieves its own unity, again, through the clever manipulation of the themes of sex, race, and love."

In *Black Women Writers: A Critical Evaluation*, Darwin T. Turner praised Morrison's "verbal descriptions that carry the reader deep into the soul of the character. . . . Equally effective, however, is her art of narrating action in a lean prose that uses adjectives cautiously while creating memorable vivid images."

Jonathan Yardley, in the *Washington Post Book World*, noted that a chief distinction of the novel is "the quality of Toni Morrison's prose . . . [The book's] real strength lies in Morrison's writing, which at times has the resonance of poetry and is precise, vivid and controlled throughout."

In the *Harvard Advocate*, Faith Davis wrote that a "beautiful and haunting atmosphere emerges out of the wreck of these folks' lives, a quality that is absolutely convincing and absolutely precise." The novel was nominated for a National Book Award in 1974, but did not win.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4
- Critical Essay #5
- Critical Essay #6
- Critical Essay #7

Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses mother-and-daughter relationships, and their effect on Sula and Nel's relationship, in Sula*.*

A prevalent theme in *Sula* is the influence of family and friends on the characters. The book focuses on two friends, Sula and Nel, but both have been shaped, and continue to be shaped, by their experiences with their families, particularly their mothers. Their mothers, in turn, have been shaped by their own mothers, in a chain reaction passing through the generations.

Eva, who has endured desperate and lonely poverty, is a strong, tough woman. She is also proud; she thinks of going back to her family in Virginia for help when her man leaves and she has no food, but as the narrator notes, "To come home dragging three young ones would have to be a step one rung before death for Eva." Instead, she scrounges as best she can for several months, and then heads out, either selling her leg to science or having it cut off in an "accident," for which she receives $10,000 in insurance payments.

This act indicates a certain ruthlessness in her character, and Eva is ruthlessly controlling, adopting three boys and giving them the same name, "Dewey," and treating them as a unit. The emotionally stunting effect of this treatment is plain; the boys eventually become so unindividuated that even their own mothers can't tell them apart, and they never grow, physically or mentally, but remain under Eva's sway.

When her son Plum returns from the war with a drug addiction, Eva pours kerosene over him and kills him by setting him on fire. She rationalizes this by saying that he would have lived a pathetic life, not the life of a man, so it was better for him to be dead.

Hannah, perhaps because she witnesses this event, gets up the courage to ask Eva if she ever loved any of her children. She feels unloved because Eva never played with them or said kind words to them. Eva defends her actions by saying there wasn't time for play and soft talk, that she was so busy just trying to get them food to eat that the notion of "play" was ridiculous, but it's clear that she's defensive, and the fact that she never actually answers the question shows that she's unable to answer "Yes."

When Hannah's dress catches fire while she's canning, Eva jumps out the window in an attempt to save her, showing that deep down, she does love her daughter. But Hannah's questioning of her mother, and her lifelong feeling of being unloved, shows that a certain amount of warmth was lacking in their relationship.

Although Hannah loves to spend time with men and has many boyfriends, she is never emotionally close to any of them; this is a legacy from Eva, who has the same temperament. Hannah passes this lack of warmth on to her daughter, Sula. Sula

overhears her mother's friend discussing her daughter: "Well, Hester grown now and I can't say love is exactly what I feel."

Hannah says, "Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference."

To a child, however, there is no difference, and this comment sears itself into Sula's consciousness, filling her with a sense of her own unlovable nature and destroying her sense of trust. She has become just like Hannah and Eva, hardened and wary, and throughout the book, she remains detached from other people, as her mother always has. Although she has many relationships with men, she refuses to commit to any of them or to become emotionally vulnerable. She believes she doesn't need anyone else to be happy, and when she finally does fall in love with Ajax, her need for commitment scares him away, hurting her deeply. When she dies, she talks bitterly about the lack of love in the world, and in her life, reflecting on her experience with her mother.

Cecile, who lives in New Orleans, took her daughter Rochelle's baby daughter away from her as soon as she was born. Cecile didn't approve of Rochelle because she was a prostitute, and brought up the girl, Helene, in a strict Catholic atmosphere:

The grandmother took Helene away from the soft
lights and flowered carpets of the Sundown House
and raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored
Virgin Mary, counseling her to be on guard
for any sign of her mother's wild blood.

Morrison doesn't discuss Cecile's reaction to this, but it's evident that mother and daughter did not have a close relationship, and that the daughter has remained bitter and closed because of it.

This lack of closeness continues between Rochelle and Helene. When Helene goes back to New Orleans after her grandmother dies, she meets her mother for the first time in many years; although Morrison doesn't make this clear, it may be for the first time since Helene was an infant. "The two looked at each other," Morrison writes. "There was no recognition in the eyes of either." Then Helene said, "This is your . . . grandmother, Nel." The only conversation between Rochelle and Helene occurs when Rochelle asks Helene about Nel: "That your only one?" They have a stiff, chilly conversation about what will be done with the house, and when Rochelle speaks Creole, Helene tells Nel severely, "I don't talk Creole. And neither do you," thus denying her past, and her connection to her mother. When Nel says of Rochelle, "She smelled so nice. And her skin was so soft." Helene says scornfully, "Much handled things are always soft," referring to her mother's life as a prostitute.

Helene brings up Nel in a strict, religious, and emotionally chilly home. "Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground," the narrator states, and gives readers a picture of Nel's life: "Nel, an only child, sat on the

steps of her back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother's incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back . . ." Nel longs for excitement, variety, and passion, but her mother doesn't foster any of these.

Because of her strict upbringing, Nel is attracted to Sula's wild, disorderly house, and Sula is equally attracted to Nel's quiet, calm qualities. "Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden," Morrison writes. Throughout the book, she makes it clear that each girl finds completion in the other; they are opposites, but they fit together and make a whole. Each is only a partial person without the other, and as girls, they're inseparable, perhaps finding in each other the warmth, support, and reassurance they didn't get from their families.

The book could easily be titled *Sula and Nel*, because it focuses on the relationship between the two women, the most important relationship either of them ever has, superseding those with their mothers and the men in their lives. Although they are very close as children, when they grow up they each feel betrayal from the other□Sula has an affair with Nel's husband Jude, forcing the end of the marriage, and when Nel gets angry and possessive about her husband and the affair, Sula feels betrayed. She had counted on Nel. Morrison writes, "Nel was the one person who had wanted nothing from her, who had accepted all aspects of her. Now she wanted everything, and all because of *that*," meaning marriage. From being a free and accepting friend, Nel has become one of "them," the traditional, possessive, small-minded and limited women of the town, according to Sula's view. This "surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal," because she had thought Nel was different.

Throughout most of the book, Sula is viewed by the other characters as evil, and Nel is seen as good. However, by the time Sula dies, their positions have become reversed. Nel visits Sula on her deathbed out of a feeling of duty□not out of true friendship or love□and feels virtuous about doing so. Sula, however, tells Nel that she may not be as good as she thinks she is. She plants a small seed of doubt in Nel's mind when she asks Nel, "How you know?" Nel responds, "Know what?" Sula says, "About who was good. How you know it was you?" Nel asks, "What you mean?" Sula responds, "I mean maybe it wasn't you [who was good]. Maybe it was me."

Soon after Sula's death, Nel goes to visit Eve, who is in a nursing home. Perhaps senile, perhaps clairvoyant, Eve looks at her and says, "Tell me how you killed that little boy," asking about Chicken Little. Nel says Sula was the one who threw him in the water, and Eve says, "You, Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched."

Nel thinks about her response to the accident. She was calm; Sula was distraught. Sula had sought help; Nel had said, "Come on, let's go." She realizes, when Chicken Little's hands slipped and he flew out into the water, she had a "good feeling." "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened?" she wonders. "How come it felt so good to see him fall?" She realizes that she is far more evil than Sula, that what she had told herself was maturity and compassion was "only the tranquility that follows a joyful stimulation"□in this case, the thrill of his death.

Nel realizes that she was even closer to Sula than she thought, more like her than she ever thought, and that her relationship with Sula was more important than any other; that it was more important than her marriage. At the end of the book, after Sula's funeral, she thinks about her feeling of sadness after her marriage broke up and says to herself, "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude," when in fact, she was missing Sula, and that now her life without her will be, as Morrison writes, "just circles and circles of sorrow." These circles reflect, and are an amplification of, her original sorrow over her relationship, or lack of a relationship, with her mother.

Source: Kelly Winters, Critical Essay on *Sula*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, McKee discusses how Morrison uses physical space to represent "the placement of experience" within a context.

In *Sula*, spacing□that is, closing down or opening up distances between things and persons□ has extraordinary urgency. Houses and bodies are the sites of hyperactive mechanisms of containment and expulsion working to effect identity and distinction: of inside and outside, of self and other. Spacing, moreover, becomes crucial to issues of representation and meaning in the Bottom, the place in Medallion, Ohio, in which most of the action of the novel occurs. Houston A. Baker Jr. has called attention to the importance of place in *Sula*: "What Morrison ultimately seeks in her coding of Afro-American PLACE is a writing of intimate, systematizing, and ordering black village values," he suggests. But although the manipulation of persons and things in space can produce a symbolic order, Morrison seems more concerned with the placement of experience that orderly representation misses.

Two places in the novel that indicate her concern to locate missing experience are "the place where Chicken Little sank" in the river and the place Eva Peace's missing leg once occupied, "the empty place on her left side." Neither of these is quite what one would expect a place to be, for neither is the present location of anything. Like the empty spaces in a symbolic order, these places mark an absence. But unlike the lacks and open spaces that in works of Faulkner and James are necessary to structures of meaning, the experience of missing in *Sula* is a particular, historical experience. Absence is not represented by the open spaces that characterize an expansive white consciousness; it is experienced in the preoccupations of a historical consciousness with what has been and might be.

Critical Essay #3

Missing takes time and takes place in *Sula*; particular persons and things are missed from particular places. Although "the closed place in the middle of the river" and the place where Eva's leg once was have nothing in them, they mark the absence of persons or parts of persons once present. Morrison thereby fills in spaces of a kind white culture identifies as empty. In *Sula*, this means converting such unoccupied spaces into places on the basis of previous occupants. Morrison locates missing persons and parts of persons in places they have formerly occupied.

Locating such occupants is one kind of preoccupation that occurs in the novel. A second kind of preoccupation, however, rather than locating missing occupants once present, places missing occupations, ones that never occurred at all. By this I mean that Morrison identifies both failed possessions of places and failed actions: various connections between occupants and their places that never took place. This second kind of preoccupation is a more absolute missing□that is, missing compounded by the prior as well as present absence of what is missed. It is nonetheless a historical experience, given characters whose past is one in which the overwhelming "meaning" of experience was negative.

Such a history is "missing" in that it is not composed of positive facts known and recorded. But it is a missing history in another sense too: as a history of missing, a history *made* by people's knowledge of what they would never become, places they would never hold, things they would never do. In the first kind of preoccupation, people are aware of something that once was present; in the second kind, people miss things that might have been but never were. Thus Morrison places both missed presences and missed absences in *Sula.*

If the experience of missing is historical and specific, it is not abstracted into a component of cultural experience, as was the case when James confronted what white Americans were missing in the nineteenth century. Rather than being abstracted, missing is embodied in *Sula*, as missing persons and missing parts of persons become the focus of meaning. Preoccupations with absence in *The Sound and the Fury*, partly because absence seems not to be experienced bodily, can be universalized into abstract elements of white male psychology. When Faulkner's Jason Compson misses the job he never had, that lack becomes a stable determinant of meaning in his life; it also becomes the means of identifying him with other white men. What the Compson men miss, repeated in form if not in content, becomes a means of relationship among them, providing consistency in their experience. Over time, the experience of missing, represented as lost causes, becomes a historical likeness too. Men make history by reproducing themselves in the imagery of lost causes.

But Morrison's characters in *Sula* are missing the means of production by which James's and Faulkner's white characters make history. Those characters can experience individual consciousness as a medium of cultural reproduction because they can assume the representative character of individual consciousness. Inner experience

and cultural experience become exchangeable, through the projections and introjections by which cultural identity is produced and reproduced. Characters in *Sula* neither produce nor reproduce the kind of forms or the kind of spaces that give both consistency and diversity to white identity. What these characters recognize in themselves and in their community are inconsistencies: broken bodies, broken objects, broken relations between persons and between persons and things. This means that they are able to produce meaning and community only by keeping experience within strict bounds.

The experience of missing what never was in *Sula* is not only an experience of missed objects but an experience of missed relations, missed connections. Such missing is clearest near the end of the novel, in 1941, when many people die at the construction site of the proposed tunnel. What the people of the Bottom see when they look at this place is not only what is there but what might have been there and is not there: all the things denied or negated by the fact that black people were never hired to work there.

Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their
hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise:
leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut
off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought,
the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets,
the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the
staggering childish malevolence of their employers. . . .Like antelopes they leaped over the little gate . . . and
smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning
kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not
mixed or even been allowed to haul; tore the wire
mesh, tipped over wheelbarrows and rolled forepoles
down the bank.

The first "thing" located in this place is hope; the second is promise. Both these relations to things were once alive and are now dead. The construction site seems preoccupied by them, and with their deaths numerous other losses are remembered. The losses recalled are things that these people did not do, things that they lost, things that broke or fell apart, but things that might have been done, kept, and changed for the better. What is missed here are hope and promise and the changes in things which they represent but which never happened.

When people turn to look at the objects actually present, these too are seen in terms of failed relations. The bricks, limestone, and wheelbarrows have been denied to the people of the Bottom as objects of their labor. What these people see, therefore, is not only the objects but also their own missing occupation with these objects: bricks not fired, limestone not mixed, wheelbarrows not used to haul. Characters' realization of what they are missing is a recognition both of lost objects and of missed relations to objects: the loss of hope, promise, repair, credit, attention, occupation. These relations are attachments of people and things that function as meaningful connections by occupying one with another. With neither their minds nor their bodies occupied in labor

as a creative relation to the world, labor in which they might become means of production and change, these people are unable to use objects or themselves to form and reform the world around them.

The tunnel site, then, is preoccupied with absences. Missing absent attachments means a massive "displacement": people tear things apart, throw things around, and start a landslide that carries some of them to their deaths in the river and buries others in the tunnel. For most of their lives, therefore, these people do not allow themselves to recognize what they miss in this scene. The role of Sula in the Bottom is to take the place of the absences that preoccupy these people at the tunnel in 1941. What circulates through the community at the tunnel site are not images of self that reassure the self of consistency in and with others but losses that individuals recognize in their own and others' experience. This awareness of loss cannot enter into circulation except with destructive effects. To contain that circulation, missing is projected onto one person, whose identification with loss will keep it within bounds.

By identifying Sula as evil and rejecting her categorically, characters are able to keep their distance from absences they cannot afford to acknowledge. In this case, keeping order depends not on emptying space of occupants but on filling in spaces whose emptiness is unbearable. Sula, occupied with loss, takes the place of absences people cannot afford to miss. Morrison has said that she "wanted Sula to be missed by the reader. That's why she dies early." To miss Sula is to recognize her occupation in and of the Bottom: what she did there and how she was a necessary part of the place, not only as a presence but because she took the place of absence.

Critical Essay #4

Various characters in Sula create order through spacing practices that allow them to control loss. The first personal perspective Morrison narrates, however, is not the perspective of any character but instead an outsider's view of the Bottom. Not really even personal, this perspective belongs to a seemingly generic "valley man."

> If a valley man happened to have business up in those
> hills□collecting rent or insurance payments□he
> might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a
> bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of "messing
> around" to the lively notes of a mouth organ. . . .
> The black people watching her would laugh and rub
> their knees, and it would be easy for the valley man
> to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that
> rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under
> their head rags and soft felt hats, somewhere in
> the palm of the hand, somewhere behind the frayed
> lapels, somewhere in the sinew's curve. He'd have
> to stand in the back of Greater Saint Matthew's and
> let the tenor's voice dress him in silk, or touch the
> hands of the spoon carvers (who had not worked in
> eight years) and let the fingers that danced on wood
> kiss his skin. Otherwise the pain would escape him
> even though the laughter was part of the pain.

A valley man is a European American, but he is identified in *Sula* not by race but by where he comes from: "white people lived on the rich valley floor in that little river town in Ohio, and the blacks populated the hills above it." The identification of this man by his place begins a scene in which Morrison places experience where it cannot be seen and in which the watching man misses it. Because he does not see and does not go to certain places that are parts of the black people's experience, he perceives spaces as empty that for them are occupied by pain.

Seeing no sign of pain, the white man sees the people's laughter as excluding pain, whereas for them "the laughter was part of the pain." This difference in perception is located as Morrison identifies places that pain resides, such as "somewhere under their head rags." Preoccupied by pain, the bodies of these people are locations of both laughter and pain, which the white man cannot recognize because he is ignorant of certain other places too. There are places he could go□to the back of Greater Saint Matthew's or up close enough to touch the hands of the carvers□where the pain of the black people's experience would not escape him.

The white man stands at a distance from the black people in this scene, excluded and exclusive. But rather than being separated by an empty space of necessary detachment, a distance built into knowledge or representation, the white man could

move into places in which he could feel what he is missing. It is not only in the experience observed, then, that something is missed in this scene, for the white man both fails to recognize certain preoccupations in the people he watches and has never been in the places occupied by their pain. His distances from the people he watches depend on excluding certain occupations—and certain missed occupations such as spoon carving—from knowledge and thereby converting places of occupation into empty spaces of separation.

Critical Essay #5

In the histories of the Bottom's inhabitants, Morrison goes on to redefine space as place. The occupants of the Bottom whose histories are first given in the novel include Shadrack, who was a soldier in the First World War, and Helene Wright, who came to the Bottom from New Orleans when she married. These are the first of the characters who practice strict containments and limitations of experience that keep things in their places.

Morrison first charts the need for such constraints in the story of Shadrack. Having seen a soldier's head blown off on a battlefield of the First World War, Shadrack reacted with a terror of things out of place.

Before him on a tray was a large tin plate divided
into three triangles. In one triangle was rice, in another
meat, and in the third stewed tomatoes. . . .
Shadrack stared at the soft colors that filled these tria
ngles. . . . All their repugnance was contained in the
neat balance of the triangles□a balance that soothed
him, transferred some of its equilibrium to him. Thus
reassured that the white, the red and the brown would
stay where they were□would not explode or burst
forth from their restricted zones□he suddenly felt
hungry and looked around for his hands. . . . Slowly
he directed one hand toward the cup and, just as he
was about to spread his fingers, they began to grow
in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack's beanstalk all
over the tray and the bed.

Shadrack is able to put a limit on the size of his hands as well as the dimensions of death by "making a place for fear as a way of controlling it". He finds a place in the Bottom, founding National Suicide Day, in 1920, as a place for death: "If one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free." Having focused his fears on this containment, Shadrack himself can be focused and contained. "Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things."

Like Shadrack, Helene experienced psychic chaos once when she left Medallion. With one slip, when she mistakenly gets into the "white" car on the train going south, she begins to lose control of her existence and slide back into an identity with her mother, "a Creole whore", from whom Helene has spent her life trying to separate herself. Morrison traces this slide in a series of displacements:

"What you think you doin', gal?"

. . . So soon. She hadn't even begun the trip back.

BOOKRAGS

Back to her grandmother's house in the city where
the red shutters glowed, and already she had been
called "gal." All the old vulnerabilities, all the old
fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach
and made her hands tremble. She had heard only
that one word; it dangled above her wide-brimmed
hat, which had slipped, in her exertion, from its carefully
leveled placement and was now tilted in a bit
of a jaunt over her eye.

Watching Helene, two black soldiers observe her exchange with the conductor. Then, as Nel, Helene's daughter, watches them all, "for no earthly reason" her mother "smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor," and the two soldiers suddenly "looked stricken." "She saw the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble" and "she resolved to be on guard□always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly." Like Shadrack glaring at his rice and tomatoes, Nel watches the "custard" and "jelly" of her mother; she then resolves to resist their spread and slippage. Never again to leave Medallion, Nel returns home to be her own self: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me."

The stories of Shadrack and of Helene and Nel's trip to New Orleans offer different experiences of a need for containment. Both characters set limits to preoccupations. These are memories that occupy their minds, but as memories of bodily disintegration they are, specifically, recollections of a loss of place. Shadrack, after seeing another body come apart, fears that his own body cannot be kept within bounds. Initiating National Suicide Day, he puts a limit to his fears, to death, and to bodily disintegration by limiting suicide to one day of the year and then "keeping" the holiday. Helene contains her fears by keeping house and keeping up standards of propriety, both in her house and in the Bottom.

But Helene's fears, and Nel's too, are apparently driven less by what they see than by what others, particularly men, see in Helene. Whereas Shadrack's body loses consistency in his own eyes, Helene is watched by others who see her body as that of a "loose" woman, "custard." Therefore Helene must contain not only her own slips but the way she spreads into someone else when men look at her. On the train south, she feels herself losing her place as Helene Wright and slipping into an identity with her mother, the whore. Then she sees herself losing her place in the men's eyes. They reflect not Helene Wright or her mother but just another black woman in sexual complicity with a white man. Once she begins to "slip," she spreads into this generalized identity because of history, memory, and fears of the men's own, preoccupations over which she has no control.

In the hospital, Shadrack is "relieved and grateful" when he is put into a straitjacket, "for his hands were at last hidden and confined to whatever size they had attained." He is further relieved when he is able to see his reflection. "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. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more." Helene, unable "to relieve herself" on the trip south because she is allowed no access to toilets, is perhaps without access either to the sense of presence that relieves Shadrack of his fears of nonexistence. As she sees herself reflected in men's eyes, she does not experience reflection as a means of bodily containment but as one other dimension in which she has difficulty keeping her place. Helene finds bodily relief in the grass but also in another "accomplishment": by the time she has reached Slidell, Louisiana, "she never felt a stir as she passed the muddy eyes of the men who stood like wrecked Dorics under the station roofs of those towns." She is relieved here not by bodily containment but by getting rid of something in her body: the urine she expels, as well as the feelings usually stirred by men watching her.

Critical Essay #6

Other women in the novel enforce more violent expulsions from their houses and their bodies, intent on getting rid of things and keeping their distance rather than keeping order. Whereas Helene Wright maintains strict standards and "the oppressive neatness of her home", the Peace women inhabit a "household of throbbing disorder constantly awry with things, people, voices and the slamming of doors." Their messy existence may not result from an indifference to limits, however; it seems instead one effect of a history of ejections and rejections by means of which the Peace women find relief in discharging fears rather than containing them. Walking out, throwing out, cutting off, sending things flying□these women affirm boundaries and their power over boundaries by getting rid of things.

Sula will walk out of Medallion on the day of Nel's wedding, as her grandmother Eva once walked out on her three children, to return "eighteen months later . . . with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg." Eva's lost leg becomes the subject of various stories. "Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off." But the stories Eva herself tells are of two kinds: "How the leg got up by itself one day and walked on off. How she hobbled after it but it ran too fast. Or how she had a corn on her toe and it just grew and grew and grew until her whole foot was a corn and then it travelled on up her leg and wouldn't stop growing until she put a red rag at the top but by that time it was already at her knee." According to these two versions, Eva's body is subject to both excursions and incursions of parts.

On her trip south, Helene Wright defends against the inconsistency of "custard" with "the best protection: her manner and her bearing, to which she would add a beautiful dress." Eva Peace deals with the inconsistency of her body not by means of consistent and beautiful forms but by making visible, even decorative, the difference between her absent and her present parts. "Nor did she wear overlong dresses to disguise the empty place on her left side. Her dresses were mid-calf so that her one glamorous leg was always in view as well as the long fall of space below her left thigh." Rendering her inconsistency itself a consistent expression of her distinction, Eva in her refusals to standardize her identity nevertheless places it by securing the difference between self and other, opening to others' scrutiny the space of the missing leg.

Eva's interest in boundaries and spaces is as evident in her house as in her body. "Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding things: more stairwars □there were three sets to the second floor□ more rooms, doors and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, . . . others that you could get to only by going through somebody's bedroom." This house does not seem primarily a container so much as an excrescence. Eva keeps building, repeatedly pushing out and throwing up forms in additions whose messiness lies in the irregularity of access to them. Both over- and underaccessed, the parts of the house confirm Eva's control over ingress and egress. Spaces between are of more concern here than spaces per se, with an unusual amount of space given over to access. Even rooms are reduced to ways in and out of other rooms, so that any

space may become itself a spacing, a distance between: not so much a room, as room to get in and out.

It is not that Eva and her house are open and free whereas Helene Wright and her house are constrained and closed. In terms of intent, the difference between the two is less than such oppositions suggest, because the primary concern of each woman seems her capacity to control and manipulate boundaries. Helene tries to preclude things slipping out of place; Eva lets things slip, even fly out of places in what may be an equally obsessive insistence on the permeability of boundaries. Hurling herself out a window of her bedroom to try to save her daughter Hannah, who has caught fire in the yard, Eva at another time burns up her son in his room because "there wasn't space for him in my womb" and "he wanted to crawl back in".

Both women are primarily occupied, then, with controlling, or even patrolling, boundaries so as to control the definition of their own selves. Both mark off the self through representations that rule out certain parts of their experience. Helene with her good form—her beautiful manner, bearing, and clothes—represents herself with a consistency that she lacks in her body and in her history. Eva's equally careful representation of her body presents an absence that also sets limits to her bodily and historical inconsistency. One woman places her past out of bounds to maintain consistency. The other maintains and thereby controls inconsistency by putting her past into a space defined by what is missing from it yet emptied of history as well as the leg. Eva's past can "take shape" only as something missing: an inconsistent, unknown, and mysterious gap in her existence.

Critical Essay #7

There are at least three distances at which characters in the novel experience the representations that provide their identity, two of which I have already discussed. In the water in a toilet, Shadrack sees his definite identity as a black man reflected back at him. As in Lacan's "mirror stage," this experience of reflection defines the self as other. If Shadrack sees his ideal self reflected in a toilet, that reflection is both ideal and abject. Yet he is nevertheless reassured that he is "real" by the reflected image. Helene Wright and Eva Peace, I have argued, produce for themselves, by manipulations of things and bodies in space, definitive representations such as Shadrack finds in reflected images. For these women, definition is not provided by reflections. But they nonetheless, as they fill in and empty spaces, provide definite forms of and limits to meaning.

Eva's daughter and granddaughter both, like her, get rid or get out of things by increasing distances between one thing and another. As a child, Sula understands the defensive value of cutting off parts of her body; she scares away the white boys who chase her by chopping off the end of her finger. Later she lets fly a whole body when Chicken Little "slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water" to his death. This is just after she herself has been "sent . . . flying up the stairs" by her mother's announcement that she does not like her. Sula, however, seems not to experience her manipulations of space as representative. Whereas Eva is characterized in stories as having cut off her leg, Sula actually cuts off part of her finger. And whereas her mother sends her flying figuratively, she sends Chicken Little's body through the air and kills him. Yet Sula does not control such acts; she does not mean them, and they effect no meaningful forms of experience for her. It is as if Sula does not have the distance from such events necessary to experience control of them.

On the one hand, Sula, like her mother and grandmother, is identified with breaks and separations. On the other, she does not use breaks and separations to give form or consistency to her experience. Unlike Eva, Sula does not place or contain inconsistency so as to limit it; she simply allows a place for losses, breaks, and separations that occur. She does not attempt to repair or reform or connect things that break or exercise any other control over them; she lets things go. Morrison says that Sula is "like any artist with no art form", and Sula does not use form to control experience. Nevertheless, she experiences definition, which occurs through the location of absence rather than in the re-presentation of forms. Because she does not use form to provide definition, Sula realizes the form and definition given to experience by absence. It is her recognition of the definitive power of missing that makes Sula's perspective extraordinary.

The ways in which Sula breaks meaning apart are to some extent familial. The Peace women enforce emotional distances, for example, with their tendency to throw things around. Because of such distances Sula can be identified, as Hortense J. Spillers argues, as "a figure of the rejected and vain part of the self□ourselves□who in its thorough corruption and selfishness cannot utter, believe in, nor prepare for, love." Sula's emotional detachment is evident in certain physical distances she maintains, such as "standing on the back porch just looking" as her mother burns to death. With

this perspective, Sula goes beyond the bounds even of her family's sense of proper distance. She repeatedly opens up what Spillers calls "subperspectives, or *angles onto* a larger seeing" because she disconnects elements of meaning that other people connect.

Sula's capacity, to "just look" depends on experiencing no emotions or intentions that connect her to objects and no meaningful links, either, between one experience and another. She can look at things without presuming anything about them, holding to no assumptions that would affect the "clarity" of her perception. She thereby calls into question assumptions other characters hold. When Jude comes home from work expecting commiseration from Nel, for example, Sula looks at his experience another way.

[He] told them a brief tale of some personal insult
done him by a customer and his boss□a whiney tale
that peaked somewhere between anger and a lapping
desire for comfort. He ended it with the observation
that a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this
world. . . . Sula sa id she didn't know about that□it
looked like a pretty good life to her. . . .

". . . White men love you. They spend so much time
worrying about your penis they forget their own. . . .
And white women? They chase you all to every corner
of the earth, feel for you under every bed. . . .
Now ain't that love?"

Sula's insistence on looking at things another way provides Jude the relief of laughter rather than the comfort of monotonous sympathy. But this relief depends on disconnection and detachment.

What occurs in such scenes is similar to what occurs when Henry James's Adam and Maggie Verver produce new views of persons and situations in *The Golden Bowl*. Yet although James identifies those views as occurring in clear or open space, Sula's way of looking at things suggests that the Ververs do not merely look. Compared with Sula, the Ververs look at things with many assumptions, with what might be called a "backing": made up, for example, of the belief that they can change situations, if not persons, by viewing them differently. Adam Verver's consciousness is one other open space that Morrison might view as preoccupied. Backed by such beliefs, the Ververs view objects in relations. Backed by no belief in relations, "just looking," Sula makes clear that Jude's experience is invisible. To look at it, it could be anything.

Source: Patricia McKee, "Black Spaces in *Sula*," in *Producing American Races*, Duke University Press, 1999, pp. 146-59.

Adaptations

Sula (1997) is an unabridged audio book narrated by Morrison and available through Random House.

Topics for Further Study

Research the Jim Crow laws and describe how they affected every area of life for African Americans.

Find out about the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s and discuss their effectiveness. What issues do you think still need to be addressed to ensure equality among different groups of people?

Research the contributions of African-American soldiers in World War I or World War II. Choose a particular soldier and write about his life before, during, and after the war.

How do you feel racism affects you? Write an essay about your experiences.

In the book, relationships between mothers and daughters are difficult and painful. Do you think this is the case for most mothers and daughters? Why or why not?

Choose a character from the book and write a story about his or her experiences during a period that is not covered in the book. For example, write about Sula's life during her ten years away from Medallion, or Shadrack's life during the war.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: More than 350,000 African-American soldiers, who serve in segregated units, return home from World War I.

Today: The United States armed forces include large numbers of African Americans, who serve in every capacity and are no longer segregated; some African Americans, such as General Colin Powell, U.S. Secretary of State during the administration of George W. Bush, achieve the highest rank.

1920s: Overall, the unemployment rate is about 5.2%, but this figure is much higher for African Americans because of prejudice against them.

Today: Unemployment ranges between 5 and 6 percent and African Americans are integrated into all sectors of society, thought they still experience a higher level of unemployment than whites.

1920s: "Jim Crow" laws, which were implemented in the late nineteenth century, segregate the South, mandating separate spheres of existence for African Americans and whites. Restaurants, stores, buses, hotels, transportation, housing, and other areas of life are rigidly separated, and African Americans who cross the barriers can be arrested and imprisoned.

Today: The widespread and growing civil rights movement brings increasing attention to the problems caused by discrimination and segregation. Although old laws restricting African Americans from voting and full participation in society were finally overturned in the 1960s, racism, bigotry, and other prejudices still exist and act to restrict full participation for many people.

What Do I Read Next?

Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), written in an episodic, experimental style, examines the heritage of slavery.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), stars Pecola, who prays each night for blue eyes, hoping that if she gets them she will finally be noticed and loved.

Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) tells the story of a triangle of passion, jealousy, murder, and redemption.

In *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison tells the story of Macon Dead, an upper-middle-class African-American entrepreneur who tries to isolate his family from other African Americans in the neighborhood, and how this affects his son.

Tar Baby (1981), by Morrison, describes a love affair between an African-American model and a white man.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison discusses the significance of African Americans in American literature.

Alice Walker's *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989) intertwines the lives of many people from the United States, England, and Africa, and provides perspectives on the colonial African experience as well as the experiences of African Americans.

In *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice Walker describes an abused woman's struggle for empowerment.

Further Study

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's For Students Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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