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Toni Morrison: Sula

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The Literary Encyclopedia

Sula

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Morrison, Toni
(1973)

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Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

Toni Morrison, while still working as an editor at Random House, saw her second novel *Sula* published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1973, amidst the developing second wave of the mainstream women's movement and the persistence of Vietnam War protests, and during the ebbing years of the Black Arts and Aesthetics Movement era in the United States. If Morrison's *Sula* was not directly influenced by the environment of war and political resistance of the 1960s and 1970s, the novel was certainly informed by the social energies generated during this embattled era.

The lives of Morrison's two main characters, Nel Wright Green and Sula Peace, along with the rich, though dying, culture of their neighbourhood, the Bottom, are the central focus of *Sula*. Morrison's story of the friendship between Nel and Sula and their lives in the Bottom is told in two parts, beginning with an untitled prologue graphically depicting wartime events in France experienced by a shell-shocked veteran named Shadrack who returns to the Bottom and establishes National Suicide Day in 1919. Morrison follows the prologue with eleven chapters named for selected years beginning with 1919 and ending in 1965. The year 1919 points Morrison's readers toward the tumultuous summer of racial violence against black people, referred to as the Red Summer by James Weldon Johnson, following the end of the first major war of the twentieth century. The year 1965 calls to mind the Watts uprising and the beginning of the Long Hot Summers of the 1960s. Also, 1965 marks the early years of the United States' explicit involvement in Vietnam. This year begins as well a shift among some African Americans from the politics of the mass-based and primarily southern Civil Rights Movement toward the radical politics of self-determination propounded in the speeches of

Malcolm X, who was assassinated that year and whose influence contributed to the shaping of the politics of the then developing and predominantly northern Black Power/Liberation era.

In *Sula*, Morrison locates her characters in a segregated black neighbourhood, a location that she refers to in the novel as “a place”; this neighbourhood, the Bottom, is located in the middle of the United States in the fictional town of Medallion Ohio, which is situated on the axis between the history of slavery and that of abolition in the United States, or freedom in Canada. Morrison adeptly inscribes segregation onto the name of this all-black neighbourhood in Ohio through her story of the supposed origins of the Bottom as a joke on a formerly enslaved black man who was told that the barely arable piece of land in the hills is the “bottom of heaven.” This story of the naming of the Bottom is Morrison’s apparent reference to the Jim Crow era colloquial term, “nigger heaven,” which was used to refer to the segregated theatre balconies where black patrons were relegated.

As with her first novel and her subsequent novels to date, Toni Morrison, similar to her

predecessor Ann Petry, constructs locations in her fiction that have become as important to her writing and as distinctive in her oeuvre as the characters that inhabit her narratives. This sense of place in Morrison's eponymously titled novel *Sula* is perhaps her most evocative, as the Bottom operates in this novel as a character in its own right along with her two main characters Nel and Sula. The Bottom, like most concentrated ethnic neighbourhoods in the United States, operates upon its own space through a shared system of mores and beliefs. In *Sula*, the values of the residents of the Bottom are presented by Morrison's apperceptive insider narrator (a type of narrative voice found in *The Bluest Eye* as well as in several other of her subsequent novels such as *Jazz* and *Beloved*) as received knowledge among its residents who are, in this novel and by Morrison's multiple uses of metonymy, the Bottom.

In Part One of *Sula*, Toni Morrison presents Nel and Sula to her readers. These two young girls find that their dichotomous home lives nevertheless create enough similarity in their emotional lives that they become fast friends, despite the "curdled scorn" of Nel's conventional mother. Morrison's Sula Peace is

an only child whose character the townspeople suspect is askew because of the rose tattoo near her eye and because of the idiosyncratic Peace household. Sula lives in a “woolly” house of “throbbing disorder” with few, if any rules. She lives in a female-centered domain with Hannah her widowed and sexually free mother, with Eva her grandmother, an amputee whose leg, according to rumours in the town, was intentionally severed for insurance money, and with the various relatives and boarders that her grandmother takes into her self-styled two-story house located at 7 Carpenter’s Road up in the Bottom. Quite the opposite is true for Morrison’s Nel Wright, whose house up in the Bottom is “oppressively neat” and whose fastidious and socially orthodox mother Helene attempts to rub down any excesses in personality that her daughter may exhibit. Nel’s father, Wiley, works on a riverboat and is rarely home. Both girls are lonely, lacking in traditional mother-love, and essentially fatherless when they decide that they will become friends.

As young girls, the lives of Toni Morrison’s main characters become interconnected as Sula mutilates her finger in order to frighten several Irish immigrant boys who were bullying Nel.

And Nel calmly keeps Sula's secret when her friend inadvertently causes a neighbourhood boy to drown. While these incidents contribute to their deep friendship, their true connection results from the desire that both have for independence and adventure, something that Morrison terms their "me," that is, their ability to live their lives on their own terms without regard for pre-established rules and conventions. Until Nel's marriage to Jude Green, a marriage which, as Morrison's narrator notes, "made one Jude," these girlhood friends were "two throats and one eye." Nel's choice to live a customary and socially prescribed life is rejected by Sula, as she leaves the Bottom immediately after Nel's marriage ceremony and does not return for ten years. Sula attends college in Nashville, Tennessee and lives in cities such as Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego, yet finds them all boring. Toni Morrison's development of Sula subverts a reader's tendency to view her simply in traditional literary terms as a character who returns to her small town changed by the big city. Sula says about the city that "Big is all it is. A big Medallion. . . . All those cities held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat".

Sula returns to the Bottom in Part Two of Morrison's novel and soon engages in an affair with Nel's husband. This affair creates a three-year breach in Sula and Nel's recently renewed friendship. This breach is partially bridged while Sula is on her deathbed in 1940 and is not fully resolved for twenty-five years, when in 1965 Nel finally realizes that her real loss over all the years was her friendship with Sula and not her marriage to Jude. By 1965, Nel comes to understand her friend's deathbed words, as Sula told Nel that the loneliness her married friend feels because of Jude's leaving is "A secondhand lonely." Morrison's Sula characterizes her loneliness as resulting from her own making and thus her dying, which she says is what every black woman is doing everyday, was analogous to the falling of a redwood instead of comparable to being cut down "like a stump", the way that Sula views the dying of Nel and the other women they know. Now more than two decades after her last conversation with her childhood friend, Nel realizes that her friendship with Sula brought forth in her an important aspect of her personality that she had repressed as she took on the acceptable social roles of wife and mother that were available to her. By following societal rules, Nel avoided the social

approbation levelled on Sula who refused these conventions in favour of her independent desires. As Morrison's Sula remarks, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself".

Through the complex relationship that Toni Morrison presents between these two characters, the writer raises questions about received notions of female friendships, marriage, and the position of women in society. She also suggests that Nel and Sula are discouraged from establishing deep, infrangible friendships with each other, as such bonds for women are traditionally limited to their relationships with men in marriage. Toni Morrison's critique of marriage and her re-visioning of female friendships are not entirely without precedent in women's writing. Morrison, indeed, revises Dorothy West's dystopic female domain, and further, by complicating the personalities of the women in *Sula* so that neither the Peace women nor the Wright women are simple representations of good or evil, she extends West's critique of black women as avatars of the self-sacrificing, maternal, and all-loving being. Through Morrison's depiction of Sula as an independent, black, female character, the

writer also alters earlier literary representations of the impetus toward African American female autonomy located in the characters of her predecessors, including Nella Larsen's Helga Crane, Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Crawford, and Ann Petry's Lutie Johnson. Morrison obviates marriage and children as motivating forces for happiness and critiques the quest for other conventional, though less gender-focused desires, such as the American dream. There is, however, a way in which Sula's radical independence is a repetition of the American mythos of rugged individualism, typically reserved for men. Toni Morrison has said of Nel and Sula, that their best qualities combined would have made a "marvellous" woman.

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison continues her literary project of writing about people and places that she herself would like to read about, characters and locations that, at the time, were not present in literature in any significant numbers. This aspect of Morrison's writing may account for the equivocal critical reception that *Sula* received upon its publication. Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, had already established her as a writer of troubling narratives and irrevocably beautiful

prose. And *Sula*, her second novel, received praise in these same terms, along with a nomination for the National Book Award, while also being critiqued in the *New York Times Book Review* as a type of literature that Morrison later would happily refer to as village literature. As Toni Morrison's stature as a writer has increased and as readers have become more familiar with her style and with her womanist and African American themes as well as more adept than in earlier years at reading them, her early novels have received critical revaluations. Toni Morrison's *Sula* is now among her most often read and frequently taught novels.

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