

Choice and the characters of sula

[Literature](#), [Character](#)



Toni Morrison's *Sula* explores the power of choice and its importance in the course of human existence. Regardless of the fact that the African-American characters of *Sula* are of an oppressed nature, they forever maintain the freedom of choice. This theme of choice provides insight into the acquirement and personification of identity. Sula and Nel, the primary characters of the novel, are utilized by Morrison to highlight how personal identity is established at our own accord.

For example, early on in the novel when Morrison is describing the childhood of Sula and Nel, both characters make the conscious decision to act according to their own ideas about the world: "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (55). Nel eventually abandons this concept and assumes a role similar to her mother's (that of respectable housewife,) but Sula remains this way throughout her life.

Because of Sula's disregard of others' opinions, she is eventually looked down upon by the townspeople of the Bottom. The actions of these two characters present the question of whether unabashed decision-making is liberating or condemning in terms of social acceptance. Another question Morrison presents is whether we can choose to acknowledge our past or not. At the beginning of the novel, Nel is traveling to her great-grandmother's funeral with her mother, Helene. Once they arrive, they come into contact with Nel's grandmother, Rochelle.

Rochelle is of Creole descent and makes a living by being an escort. Helene is quick to dismiss Rochelle: "'I don't know,' her mother said. 'I don't speak Creole. ' She gazed at her daughter's wet buttocks. ' And neither do you'"

(27). It is evident that Helene thinks that by refusing to speak the Creole language that she is also refusing to acknowledge Rochelle and, therefore, erasing her from her and her daughter's past. With Helene and her behavior towards Rochelle, Morrison presents this question of whether or not we can choose which parts of our past are relevant to our current existence.

Following the meeting between Nel and Rochelle, Morrison showcases that characters can choose not only to disregard their past, but also forces in the present that attempt to dictate an individual's identity: "'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me'... ' Me,' she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, ' I want... I want to be... wonderful... Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful'" (28). Nel realizes that she can make the choice about who she wants to be and about her own identity. She denies her identity being determined by her parents or her heritage.

Morrison also highlights how characters utilize the freedom of choice to deter their fears of the unknown future. For example, Shadrack makes the choice to control the uncontrollable after he experiences a mental breakdown during his time in the war: " It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that 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. In this manner he instituted NationalSuicideDay" (14).

Instead of letting his life be dictated by outside forces, he chooses the path his life will take by seeking power over what terrifies him the most. While every character in Sula makes a choice of some kind, there is one character who was seemingly denied the luxury of choice and that was Eva Peace: "

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The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and energy for it" (32).

Eva's choice was made by the circumstances of her life and the lives of her children. Later on in the novel, Eva denies Plum Peace, her son, the choice to redeem his wayward ways. She sets him on fire after she discovers he has a heroin addiction following the war. In contrast to Eva and her lack of choice in providing for her family by any means necessary, Nel's husband Jude did possess the power of choice and chose to abandon his family following an affair with Sula: "'Every man I ever knew left his children. ' ' Some were taken. ' ' Wrong, Nellie.

The word is left'" (143). Morrison uses this conversation to highlight the stark contrast between Nel and Sula and their diverging beliefs in the freedom of choice. Sula maintains that Jude chose to leave his family while Nel argues that he had no choice in being taken away following his shame about the affair. Morrison also portrays how characters make choices based on personal perceptions: " But thinking Sula had an odd way of looking at things and that her wide smile took some of the sting away from that rattlesnake over her eye" (68).

Jude articulates the notion that we can choose how we see things and this can impact the way others see us. Many of the townsfolk of the Bottom perceive Sula as evil based on the appearance of her scar. Morrison's detailed description of the various images people imagine the scar to be showcases how each individual has the personal power to choose how to

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view others. While one person may perceive the scar to be a treacherous snake, another perceived it to be a smudge of dirt or a butterfly wing.

It is in *Sula* that readers are presented with various notions regarding the power of freedom of choice. *Sula* poses the question of what earthly forces influence choice and it also showcases how the power of personal decisions dictate our lives and identities. With Nel and Sula, readers are provided apt character studies in the ramifications of choice. Morrison also presents the rationale behind what actions classify as “good” and “evil” when choosing our moral paths in life. Sula is portrayed as “evil” simply because she chooses her own path, regardless of social norms.

In contrast, Nel is considered “good” because of her ability to assume the role society casts her in, whether it be faithful wife or doting mother. In the end, we come to realize that Sula’s “careless choices” dictated the prosperity of the town and the behavior of the townsfolk. In her absence, the Bottom and the townspeople suffer from their careless choices that were previously held at bay because of Sula’s presence. Morrison presents the notion that we always possess the power of choice, but whether our choices will be viewed as good or evil is in the hands of others.