

# Presentation of womanhood in toni morrison's sula essay



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In her moving and astonishing novel *Sula*, published in 1973, Toni Morrison presents the lives of two black heroines – Nel Wright and Sula Peace. The author pictures their growing up together in a small Ohio town, their sharply divergent paths of womanhood, and their ultimate confrontation and reconciliation. Nel Wright chooses to stay in the place of her birth, to marry, to raise a family, to become a pillar of the tightly knit black community. Sula Peace rejects all that Nel has accepted.

She escapes to college, submerges herself in city life, and when she returns to her roots, it is as a rebel, a mocker, a sexual seductress. Both women must suffer the consequences of their choices; both must decide if they can afford to harbour the love they have for each other; and both combine to create an unforgettable rendering of what it means and costs to exist and survive as a black woman in America. *Sula* chronicles a community in which black women dominate public and private life. Sula Peace is conceived outside of the constraints ordinarily felt by women in her community (she is “dangerously female”). She rejects every available social script, which as a result generates public tension. Despite any real or perceived limitations imposed by her family, her community, or the era in which she is depicted, Sula does not put any limits upon herself.

Still, her “quintessential blackness” isolates her from a community that enacts an utterly antithetical aesthetic. A young woman coming of age in a rural Ohio community during the period between the World Wars, Sula is marked, both literally and figuratively, by her singularity of thought and action. She leaves her hometown for ten years, during which she travels across the country and attends college. When she returns, she refuses to

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maintain the family house in the manner of her mother and grandmother before her. Her sexual exploits do not (nor does she intend them to) lead her to a state of monogamy, shared domesticity, or even steady companionship; with one memorable exception, Sula's interactions with men are consciously finite. Two incidents in the novel figure prominently in Sula's development: the first, a conversation in which she overhears her mother, Hannah, conclude, “.

. . I love Sula. I just don't like her”<sup>1</sup>; the second, her inadvertent participation in the drowning of one of her peers, a young boy named Chicken Little. Morrison sums up the overall effect of these incidents in one passage: “..

. she [Sula] lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, hers was an experimental life-ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow..

.. She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments- no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself- be consistent with herself.”<sup>2</sup>The passage describes how Sula's personality has taken shape,

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and, ironically, in the shapelessness of this shape, the paradox of Sula is revealed. The foundation of Sula's character is, Morrison writes, a lack of foundation, a structurelessness that affects every thought, every action, and every interaction that Sula has.

Formed of a creative formlessness, Sula seeks only her own counsel, leaving her indifferent to or uninterested in any kind of morality. Since she has no ambition, she does not project herself, or her actions, into the future, which suggests that she has no sense of, or sensitivity to, cause and effect. Since she does not place the events of her life into a larger context, or even consider them in relation to one another, each experience stands alone. Nel is Sula's counterpart in the novel.

As Sula's childhood confidante, Nel functions much like a sister, someone whose presence Sula never fundamentally questions. There is no question that they complement each other, yet their characters are fundamentally, finally discrete. Sula dies without ever approaching the kind of intimacy of which Nel is capable and, although Nel does eventually gain insight into Sula's world, it is achieved only decades after Sula's death. Despite dramatic differences in upbringing, there are similarities that draw Sula and Nel together: " Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each others' eyes the intimacy they were looking for" 3.

Up until Nel's marriage to Jude, Sula and Nel are kindred spirits. It is upon Sula's return to the Bottom after her ten-year absence that the differences

between Sula and Nel are tested and the extent of Sula's otherness made manifest. As an adult, married with three children, Nel is utterly contained by the Bottom's sensibility. She knows and believes in all the laws and values of that community. Sula does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all or ignores them.

Nel's knowledge and experience is local, with no frame of reference outside her hometown. Sula is her complete opposite in this matter. Sula's long, high-heeled trek up the Bottom's street is an appropriate introduction for her reappearance in the neighborhood. Armed with a college education and an edgy cynicism, Sula is an outcast from the start. Her status as a woman without a man and a woman without children simply does not translate into a life that the Bottom understands. Sula's grandmother, Eva, speaks for the whole community when she tells her granddaughter to have some babies, that it will "settle" her.

When Sula responds defensively, they argue: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man." "You did.

"Not by choice." "Mamma did." "Not by choice, I said. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself.

"Eva (like Eve, the first woman) has been the reigning matriarch of her own family/community for years and she is powerful and independent and fierce in the role. Even though she is not part of a couple herself, to simply reject the notion out-of-hand is incomprehensible, even to her. It is the accepted template for women's lives, even though it is, more often than not, a failed <https://assignbuster.com/presentation-of-womanhood-in-toni-morrisons-sula-essay/>

or malfunctioning model. Furthermore, to Eva and to people in the Bottom, children are part of the order of things, the literal outgrowth of a concept of womanhood that is valued by what it produces and tends. To Sula, however, being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood.

Her own "business"- the business of being, of living, is not dictated by family or community. From the beginning of her return to the Bottom, Sula is perceived as evil- so evil that the townspeople believe that she has supernatural powers. Sula is conceived, in part, as an enchanter, she is also affiliated with the antidote to the kind of power or black magic she is ultimately accused of inflicting upon the town. Certainly, Sula's birthmark "marks" her as different from conception, but her second birth or incarnation in the Bottom is also "marked": "Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion. The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning" 5. Essentially, Sula's return to the Bottom is greeted with a stoning, a punishment traditionally reserved for the public humiliation of a criminal or, more to the point, a witch.

In addition, Sula's re-arrival becomes linked to the physical accidents of others. When Teapot, a young boy, comes to Sula's door to collect bottles, he falls down her steps and hurts himself. And when Mr. Finley, who had sucked on chicken bones for years, looks up to see Sula in the distance, he chokes on a chicken bone and dies. The result of all these incidents is that Sula comes to be regarded as the local incarnation of evil, a pariah who effects and creates change and catastrophe within the social and natural worlds. Actually, Sula allows the Bottom to create its own bottom- to build, in <https://assignbuster.com/presentation-of-womanhood-in-toni-morrisons-sula-essay/>

the collective rejection of her, a frame of social rules over which it can stretch its convictions.

In other words, the people of the Bottom facilitate Sula's paradox: because they believe her to be evil, she provides for them an antidote to themselves. It is only because the community believes in evil as a matter of course that it is able to cast Sula in the role of pariah at all. Sula becomes the woman the Bottom loves to hate and, in hating her, Sula's seductiveness is never stronger. In fact, the townspeople are seduced by their own interpretation of Sula's evilness. Protecting themselves from her through ritual, they nonetheless leave her to her own devices: " . .

. they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps. But aside from one or two unsuccessful efforts to collect the dust from her footsteps, they did nothing to harm her. As always the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run". 6When Sula dies, the people of the Bottom are left without a direct, evil force with which to contend.

Her death, described as a " sleep of water," coincides with an early frost (suggesting that Sula does have some influence over the forces of nature), which ruins harvests and renders folks housebound. With environmental and communal warmth frozen, even Teapot's Mama, who had become doting after she feared that Sula had knocked her five-year-old down the steps, returns to beating her son:" She was not alone. Other mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they

had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair..

. Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity". 7The anger and passion that Sula generated, kept the Bottom up and running.

In this way, Sula nurtured, even sexualized her community. Ironically, in the community's collective hatred of her, Sula enforces the very roles they accused her of abusing: mother and lover. Her death renders the town socially impotent, as citizens are moved to undo the good that her alleged evil provoked. Sula is aware of the impact that she has on the Bottom, and nowhere is this knowledge more pointed than in her deathbed rave to Nel, which assumes the form of a half-humorous, half-haunting incantation. Sula's ironic speech about the town's hatred comes across as a kind of spell, a final reckoning that she sets into motion just before her death. In it, she articulates the unlikelihood of ever being understood on her own terms and, in the process of this articulation, underscores the unreadiness of the Bottom to entertain any other world-view than its own:" Oh, they'll love me all right .

... After all the old women have lain with the teenagers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles; after all the black men fuck all the white ones; when all the white women kiss all the black ones; when the guards have raped all the jail birds and after all the whores make love to their grannies; after all the faggots get their mothers' trim; when Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit;



after all the dogs have fucked all the cats and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs ...

then there'll be a little love left over for me" 8. The ending of the novel completes the parable that Morrison's prelude began. Through Sula and Nel, respectively, Morrison narrates the good side of bad and the bad side of good. Sula lives according to her own design and, for that independence, dies early and alone on the second floor of an empty, run-down house.

However, right till the end she believes that choosing to stay independent was worth it. Her dialogue with Nel proves it: "You think I don't know what your life is like just because I ain't living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing. (...

) Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world".

" Really? What have you got to show for it?" " Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me". " Lonely, ain't it?" " Yes.

But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely".

(...)" I always understood how you could take a man. Now I understand why you can't keep none".

“ Is that what I’m supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?”” They worth keeping, Sula”.” They ain’t worth more than me.” 9Nel is the one who survives, but it is only on the final page of the novel that she begins to understand that it is Sula, and not Jude, who she has been missing for decades. The parable is seemingly complete: one must strive to strike a balance between self-knowledge and narcissism. Perhaps Nel should have known herself better, Sula should not have known herself quite so well, and the people of the Bottom should have recognized the good that their perception of Sula’s evil fostered. Although perceived by others as evil, Sula simply tries to live her own life in her own way.

Her resistance to the values that the Bottom’s community would like to impose on her (being a wife/ a mother), is due to her want of staying true to herself. And sometimes by affirming own mode of being in the world one has to pay the price of such a choice.