

# When Communities Fall: A Critical Analysis of Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Sami Saigh

## Abstract

When women dare to self-actualize they frequently face barriers that tear their spirits down, leading to guilt, shame, and feelings of inadequacy. For the lineage of women in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, these consequences are fatal for everyone. As these factors thwart fundamental social development, communal collapse becomes easier, leaving entire cultures vulnerable to erasure. Whether self-determination is expressed through promiscuity or properness, paradoxical moralism leaves no room for either. This essay explores how Morrison offers a retrospective look from the graveyard of a town while illustrating the impact of the loss of friends, lovers, and communities.

A community can be a tragically frail thing when it is plagued by a history of disenfranchisement and marred by paradoxical moralism. Such challenges lead to communal collapse, which becomes less difficult when the community and its constituents lack an anchor—practical, material, spiritual, or otherwise. In her 1973 novel, *Sula*, Toni Morrison imbues symbolism and tone with a tinge of magical realism to illustrate the role of shame and guilt in the social development of the Peace and Wright women, asserting all the while that the death of self is the death of community. And though it is not obvious, Morrison does not neglect to leave room for hope—hope for freedom, for unity, and for stability.

Although it is a relatively short book, *Sula* is in some respects an epic—its events, both contemporaneous and referential, reasonably span at least half a century. During that period of time, Morrison grants us something of a panoramic look at both a friendship and the spiritual and material state of a fictional town in Ohio. Morrison does not miss a chance,

even before the story begins, to be prophetic; *Sula*'s epigraph is a poignant line from Tennessee Williams' 1951 play, *The Rose Tattoo*, which reads, "... I had too much glory. They don't want glory like *that* in nobody's heart." With these two short lines, Morrison sets the tone for a tragedy uniquely saturated in Blackness. The past tense, italic emphasis, and double negative all hint at repression—the quelling of freedom, of passion, of glory—a theme so ubiquitous in the collective Black conscious, especially in Black art, that one cannot help but already wonder who it is that had too much glory and why they are ostensibly stripped of it.

Keeping the epigraph in mind throughout this analysis of *Sula* provides a thematic backbone to such a critical discussion. Equally important, too, is Morrison's own foreword to *Sula*. In it, she asks a crucial question that serves to break away from the restraints of what a Black woman writer and her characters might face: "What are the risks of individualism in a determinedly individualistic, yet racially uniform and socially static, community?" (Morrison xiii). Here, one can interpret Morrison as inquiring more generally on the nature of any social conflict—when individualism, uniformity, and staticism clash, discord arises. What occurs when one dares to self-actualize, to become oneself without restraint, in a society borne of a paradox, as *Sula*'s the Bottom is? Such conflict is reflected on both the interpersonal and the communal scales in *Sula*. With these ponderings, a full, more wholly aware analysis of *Sula* can ensue.

In describing characters and their environments, Morrison does not delay in infusing her tale with magical realism, which serves to provide some basis of (literary) logic for a tragedy so illogical, so unimaginable, so absurd as the death of a community. Shadrack, a traumatized WWI veteran, returns home to Medallion and, overwhelmed by the unexpected nature of death, institutes Suicide Day. Subsequently, residents of Medallion live through uncanny events that surround Suicide Day: "somebody's grandmother said her hens always started a laying of double yolks right

after Suicide Day” (Morrison 16). Soon enough, residents “simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts” (Morrison 15), and it became “a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio” (Morrison 16). Given this look into the surreal idiosyncrasy of the Bottom and those who dwell there, we are plunged into a personal background of one of the only characters who doesn’t come from there: Helene. With this, Morrison directs her focus to the novel’s women at the microcosmic level, exploring at first their childhoods and origins. It is *Sula*’s women who are at the center of the story, which is driven by them, and ends with them—it is to them we owe our gaze and attention as well.

Helene, more or less, begins the Wright matrilineage, and is defined by what she is not, where she does not come from; the first words of the chapter that introduces her proclaim that “it had to be as far away from the Sundown House as possible” (Morrison 17), injecting a sense of negative direness to Helene’s newborn life. This urgency is connected to the shame of having been born to a “Creole whore”—an identity virtually erased away by Helene’s grandmother, who took her away from the brothel her mother worked in, and “raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary ... constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (Morrison 17). This religious symbolism later transmutes into a pervasive aspect of life and moral bearing for the Wright women.

However, deprivation of a true maternal connection leaves Helene estranged and emotionally distant from any motherly identification, traits that she ends up bequeathing to her daughter, Nel. Helene’s acquired conservatism renders Nel’s childhood one where “any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (Morrison 18), and “strict moral rules turn Nel into a perfect young woman ... loving anyone but herself” (Kitanovska-Ristoska 308), painting a bleak picture for Nel’s development later on.

Once Helene gets situated in Medallion, her grandmother becomes terminally ill at which she reluctantly travels back down South to visit her. This trip becomes a sort of personal revelation for young Nel. A run-in with transit segregation on a train shakes Nel's own identity through her mother's when a demeaning encounter with a white conductor and severe glances from two Black soldiers push Helene to regress to a thinly veiled insecurity as a Black woman in a place where she does not seem to belong. These events are devastating in their significance. If Helene, such an otherwise strong and anchor-like woman, can be pushed down and stripped of her glory, what happens to her daughter? To her community? Anti-Blackness and misogyny intersect here to foretell how the collapse of the self can aggrandize, affecting not only a family but an entire community.

This experience pushes Nel's eyes downward in embarrassment as she considers that "if this tall, proud woman ... who was very particular ... with unequaled elegance ... if *she* were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (Morrison 22). Fearing her own materialization as a soft, weak, easily disintegrated woman, as 'custard', Nel resolves "to be on guard" in the very same way that her mother before her was taught to "be constantly on guard for any sign" of her own mother's "wild blood" (Morrison 22). Nel and other women in the novel aim to do what her mother could not, that is, to keep face and "strategically transmute oppression into its subversion" (Anderson and Fallon 2). Already one can bear witness to the generational nature of shame in the female families of *Sula*—patterns propagated forward by the psychosocial effects of doubly-marginalizing Black and feminine identities.

Helene and Nel end up arriving in New Orleans too late, as Helene's grandmother Cecile had already passed away. At the house, Helene runs into her mother, and it becomes clear that "there was no recognition in the eyes of either" (Morrison 25). Helene, faced with a confused Nel, explains with hesitation: "This is your grandmother. My ... mother" (Morrison 25).

Helene's mother Rochelle is referred to by name only twice in the entire book, a fact which adds to the cruel sense of ignorance imposed on her by Cecile and inherited by Helene. Rochelle begins to interact playfully with Nel, evoking a visible discomfort in Helene, who becomes fixated on Rochelle's manner of speech. When Rochelle asks Nel, "Comment t'appelle?", Helene steps in with an unmistakably abrupt tone, interjecting that "She doesn't talk Creole (Morrison 26). Later, when Nel voices her curiosity on the subject, Helene responds in the same way: "I don't talk Creole. ... And neither do you" (Morrison 27), reinforcing the shame embedded in ideas of origins and languages considered unsightly and disgraceful.

From here Morrison leads us into an introduction to Eva, who begins the Peace matrilineage. Her husband BoyBoy leaves her after a short and unhappy marriage, which prompts her to consider returning home to Virginia. She decides against it, reasoning that "to come home dragging three young ones would have to be a step one rung before death for Eva" (Morrison 33), establishing her as a headstrong, proud woman for whom shame is a form of death. It is with shame, however, that she recalls how "she had probably been a fool to let BoyBoy haul her away from her people" (Morrison 33). When BoyBoy returns to visit years later, her shame makes a raging but confused comeback: she ponders in a fit of emotional discontinuity whether upon seeing him she would "cry, cut his throat, beg him to make love to her?" (Morrison 35). It is a sense of visceral anger that prevails, as she admits "it was hating him that kept her alive and happy," although it was after BoyBoy's visit that she began "her retreat to her bedroom," lending her nonetheless the image of an old, bitter woman (Morrison 37).

From Eva, Morrison moves to her daughter, Hannah, whose childhood and origins are not detailed, aside from that she "married a laughing man named Rekus who died when their daughter Sula was about three years old" (Morrison 41). This lends an almost unimportant air to an

otherwise presumably cataclysmic event in one's life—the loss of a spouse. Immediately after this, Morrison jumps to a discussion of an adult Hannah's characteristics and mannerisms. It is made clear that it was “manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters,” establishing early on that romance and sex was a defining part of life for them (Morrison 41). However, as will be revealed throughout the course of the novel, not everybody in the Bottom appreciates or even tolerates “manlove,” and the Peace women end up being known for their promiscuity.

Promiscuity as a trait is almost enshrined in Morrison's depiction of the Peace women, especially in the sexualization of Hannah as a perverse exaggeration of the “manlove” she inherited from Eva. Morrison draws a subtle distinction between having sex with somebody and sharing a bed with them, which Hannah is particular about: “Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with ... [but] she would fuck practically anything” (Morrison 43). This contributes to a fair bit of dissonance among the (female) residents of the Bottom, for whom Hannah did not belong to the “‘good’ women ... [nor the] whores... [nor the] middling women” (Morrison 43), who were all at odds with Hannah. Contrary to any previous social categorization, Hannah becomes a woman of her own accord, as somebody who just “wanted ... some touching every day” (Morrison 44), signaling an unprecedentedly shame-free, lax attitude towards sex that she would unknowingly bestow on her daughter Sula.

Sula's childhood is thus quickly marked by two things: her friendship with Nel, and her ability to draw the gaze of men (along with Nel). In a scene that tells of Sula and Nel early on in their friendship, they walk through a “valley of eyes ... heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares” (Morrison 50) from old and young men. This metaphorization of their environment somewhat foreshadows Sula's future social surroundings, a constant valley of eyes which look unfavorably upon her. Sula and Nel, for their part, found each other because “freedom and triumph was forbidden to them ... it let them use each other to grow on”

(Morrison 52). Morrison goes on to explain that as “daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers ... they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for,” suggesting a dynamic between two girls, who by no fault of their own, lack a secure sense of self or self-center (Morrison 52).

Morrison, however, draws focus to the title character again, pointing out a particularity in her appearance: “a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose” (Morrison 53). It will be important to track the symbolism and external perceptions of this birthmark; it will “grow darker as the years passed” (Morrison 53).

This point in the story resembles something of a turning point which precedes multiple events that, among other sentiments, evoke shame, guilt, and self-deprecation. It is from here on that Morrison shows exactly why and how it is that Sula and Nel bond in the face of adversity.

The first instance of such an event occurs between Sula and her mother Hannah, who was casually discussing with her friends “the problems of child rearing” (Morrison 56). In emotionally cataclysmic fragments that Sula overhears, Hannah reveals that “I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (Morrison 57). This curt yet heartbreaking confession upsets Sula, perhaps existentially so, considering the gravity and shame of such a strain between a mother and her young daughter, sending her upstairs until “Nel’s call floated up and into the window, pulling her away from dark thoughts,” and towards a friendship of refuge (Morrison 57).

A second instance of an event that puts on full display the bond between Sula and Nel involves the accidental death of a neighborhood boy named Chicken Little. Playing with him, Sula swings him around until he slips from her hands, lands in the lake, and drowns. The girls’ first instinct is terror, guilt, and protection of the other, as “Nel spoke first. ‘Somebody saw’” (Morrison 61). After a cryptic encounter with Shadrack, who

witnessed the scene, “Sula fled ... back to Nel ... there she collapsed in tears” (Morrison 62). But there is no expression of the convergence of guilt and incompleteness more poignant than that of Chicken’s funeral where Nel and Sula “held hands and knew that only the coffin would lie in the earth; the bubbly laughter [of Chicken] and the press of fingers in the palm [of Sula] would stay above ground forever” (Morrison 62), in crushing acknowledgement of their inadvertent crime’s indelibility.

A third instance of such an event happens between Hannah and Eva. In a reflection of Sula’s eavesdropping on Hannah, Hannah directly asks her mother Eva, “Mamma, did you ever love us?” (Morrison 67). Eva is equally direct in her answer: “No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’,” signaling a crucial generational dissonance in the very definition of love (Morrison 67). Eva goes on to explain how she views love and, while growing gradually irate, calls an already degraded Hannah a “snake-eyed ungrateful hussy” (Morrison 69). A noticeable shift in tone shows an angry and insulted Eva, who in a nearly despairing, unpunctuated tirade recounts how she would “put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ‘bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?” (Morrison 69).

This back-and-forth does not end there. Hannah decides to confront Eva with a question that seemingly contradicts everything she has just ranted about: “But what about Plum? What’d you kill Plum for, Mamma?” (Morrison 70). This question has a deadening impact, and effectively stops Eva in her tracks, ushering in over a full page without dialogue while Eva reminisces until “even on this hottest of days in the hot spell, Eva shivered from the biting cold and stench of that outhouse,” conveying precisely how the pain and guilt of memory exceeds the discomfort of the present (Morrison 71).

When she finally speaks, as though trying to pardon herself, she makes eight separate references to not having a large enough womb for



Plum to fit back into within the same monologue. And yet again, in another show of Morrison's magical realism, it is never made completely clear whether Eva was speaking literally or figuratively; she only seemed resolute that "I ain't got the room no more ... I couldn't birth him twice" (Morrison 72). Irrespective of how justified Eva feels about this confession, guilt prevails when she says, "by way of apology or explanation ... But I held him close first" (Morrison 72).

In the same way Eva killed Plum by soaking him in kerosene and burning him alive, the symbolism of fire strikes again later, this time killing Hannah, either by accident or by suicide, another fact that remains unclear. In what might be interpreted as intense guilt and resentment, Eva could "smell the familiar odor of cooked flesh" (Morrison 77). Pondering the scene later, she remembers Sula's passive presence at the scene, "convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (Morrison 78). This glimpse into the surreal psychologies of Eva and Sula gives an inkling that Sula is somehow disturbed—an idea that takes hold and only grows more prevalent in the community's view of her.

A jump in the novel's timeline takes us away from childhood and into adulthood, which can also be seen as a transition from focusing on dependence on the parental, to dependence on the lateral, which introduces new sources of tension, namely sex, romance, marriage, and love. With this, 1927 ushers in a seemingly joyous era with the marriage of Nel and Jude. However, we are given the impression that Nel is to become a wife who is totally submissive to her husband and that "the two of them together would make one Jude" (Morrison 83). A short look into the past also offers us the insight of words Ajax once uttered at the Time and a Half Pool Hall: "Ax em to die for you and they yours for life," reinforcing the soon-to-be reality of Nel's personal life. The end of the wedding signals Sula's departure from Medallion: "Even from the rear Nel could tell that it

was Sula and that she was smiling ... their meeting would be thick with birds” (Morrison 85).

The bittersweetness of this temporary farewell quickly sheds its sweetness when Morrison takes us ten years into the future, announcing Sula’s return “by a plague of robins ... robins flying and dying all around you” (Morrison 89). This omen forebodes the existential disaster to be faced by Sula, by Nel, and by the Bottom as a whole. Residents of the Bottom even carry with them a “full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones,” a nod to the public perceptions of Sula (Morrison 90).

At once Sula returns home to Eva, and their interaction inflames to evoking shame and guilt from the past, bringing up debts, marriage, and deaths, mirroring very closely the dynamic that existed between Hannah and Eva. Eva insults Sula as “Selfish ... you lyin’ heifer! ... Pus mouth! God’s going to strike you!” (Morrison 92-93) and Sula brings to light yet again that unspeakable part of Eva’s past: “Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?” (Morrison 93). This conversation culminates in a frightening turn that arrests even Eva when Sula threatens, “Maybe one night when you dozing ... I’ll tip on up here with some kerosene ... you may make the brightest flame of them all” (Morrison 94). This racks Eva with paranoia, pushing her even further into isolation. Shortly after this verbal altercation Sula decides to admit Eva to a nursing home and “just above the word ‘guardian,’ she very carefully wrote Miss Sula Mae Peace,” reversing the power dynamic between her and her grandmother in a show of assertion and rebuke (Morrison 94).

The next person Sula reunites with is Nel. The strength of their bond is shown by the casual nature of their exchange even after a decade: “Hey, girl ... Hey yourself. Come on in here ... How you doin?” (Morrison 96). When she meets Jude again, it is perhaps through his perspective that the rose under her eyebrow turns into “a copperhead over her eye ... a woman roaming the country trying to find some man to burden down,” indicating

Jude's implicit recognition of Sula's propensity to promiscuity (Morrison 103). The birthmark shape shifts again as Jude notes "that her wide smile took some of the sting from that rattlesnake over her eye," hinting at a view of Sula as a dangerous woman (Morrison 104).

It is after these observations that Morrison grants a forbidden look into the ultimate emotional cataclysm for Nel; Jude cheating on her with Sula. For the first time in the book, the omniscient narrative voice is broken, giving way to Nel's unfiltered first person voice. This stream of consciousness style allows for a confounded mix of shame, denial, and affective discontinuity—Nel does not allow herself to understand or feel the full impact of her husband's and best friend's simultaneous infidelity to her. She details how they had been "on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs," introducing a dimension of shame (Morrison 105). In refusing to believe the scene, Nel repeats that "they are not doing that ... they are not really doing it ... maybe there was some explanation, something important that I did not know" (Morrison 105).

The most destructive part about Nel's experience is in her ultimate failure to uphold the promise she had made to herself nearly two decades earlier. She fixates on that "your fly was open and [I] was scared too because your eyes looked like the soldiers' that time on the train when my mother turned to custard" (Morrison 106). In a striking instance of parallelism, Nel turns to custard like her mother before her, representing "a generation of children locked into equally desperate cycles," thereby losing a massive part of her sense of self (Pruitt 118). As the narrative returns to the omniscient voice, we see Nel through an external lens, namely her inability to deal with her grief while "she waited for something to happen ... inside ... waited for the oldest cry ... her very own howl. But it did not come" (Morrison 107). For Nel, being forsaken by both her husband and best friend was the ultimate form of receiving acknowledgement that she was essentially unwanted, even disposable.

Sula's actions isolated her from the people of the Bottom, who "said Sula was a roach ... said she was a bitch" (Morrison 112). Her status as a pariah converged with the way her community's perceptions of her affected her sense of self, showing her that "there was no other that you could count on ... there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow" (Morrison 119). It is precisely this innate incompleteness that leads Sula to her decidedly deviant behavior: self-destructive tendencies, promiscuity, and lack of ambition. Sula's expression of the most visible of these attitudes, namely through sex, allow her to thrive momentarily and "assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her ... but the cluster did break, fall apart" (Morrison 123).

Soon, Sula indulges in an affair with Ajax, a man who she knew from her childhood at the Pool Hall. Their affair was full of passion and sexual tension, but Sula, contrary to her usual attitudes, "began to discover what possession was" (Morrison 131). In an atypical expression of servility to a partner, Sula decides to tie "a green ribbon in her hair," embodying many aspects of wifehood until "the bathroom was gleaming, the bed was made, and the table was set for two" (Morrison 132). Eventually, this yearning for homely attachment proves fatal for their relationship; one day he takes note of the home's orderliness, and "detected the scent of the nest ... he knew that very soon she would ... put to him the death-knell question 'Where you been?'" (Morrison 132). Here it becomes clear that Sula's "nest-making instinct, the possessiveness of her beloved" comes in conflict with Ajax's aversion to commitment (Anderson and Fallon 11). He promptly leaves her, having "left nothing but his stunning absence... as if she were afraid she had hallucinated him" (Morrison 134).

Looking desperately for evidence that Ajax was real, Sula finds his license, which reads "Albert Jacks," and "said aloud to no one ... 'And if I didn't know his name, then there is nothing I did know'" (Morrison 136). A striking parallel yet again bridges Sula and Nel as women who vowed to be strong and failed. Sula reminisces playing with dolls and bending their

necks to snap off their heads, noting how she herself held her own head stiffly so it wouldn't come off. To dispel this false belief "Nel was the one who told me the truth. But she was wrong. I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls" (Morrison 136). Thus, we see the forlornness of two women, who through different ways have lost something defining to them.

A year after this, we have yet another reunion of characters, this time between Sula and Nel. The tension here is indicated by Sula's birthmark; for Nel, it is now "the stemmed rose that hung over the eye of her enemy ... resentment and shame ... the black rose that Jude kissed" (Morrison 138). When Nel confronts Sula about why she slept with Jude, she succinctly, almost nonchalantly replies, "Well, there was this space ... Jude filled it up. That's all" (Morrison 144). Nel is faced with an indifferent, almost remorseless Sula who "couldn't give her a sensible answer" (Morrison 145). An escalation in their conversation leads to a breakdown in communication, pushing Nel to leave Sula once and for all, solidifying the crumbling of their friendship ... "Goodbye, Sula. I don't reckon I'll be back" (Morrison 146).

Shortly after, Sula has a strange recurring dream that leaves her in a cloud of baking powder that "covered her, filled her eyes, her nose, her throat ... overwhelmed with the smell of smoke" (Morrison 148). She then enters a state of great agony, exhaustion, and disoriented reminiscing after which she dies. It is unclear how exactly she dies, though "the wires of liquid pain... waves, hammer strokes, razor edges or small explosions... the taste of oil at the back of her tongue" all recall the same fiery symbolism that killed Hannah and Plum before her (Morrison 148). Morrison again dips into her magical realist side, showing a Sula who even during and after death thinks of her friend Nel (Morrison 149).

In the Bottom, Sula's death is seemingly a cause for joy, though soon enough "without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair," indicating that the residents' zeal for communal hatred and

social exiling had essentially been extinguished when the cause for it died (Morrison 153). Scholars Naeem Nedae and Ali Salmi argue that “marked by promiscuity in the eye of a moralist community, Sula serves only as a foil for reinforcing the community’s sense of properness” (123). In an unprecedented and hysterically glee-filled Suicide Day parade, the residents of the Bottom take to the streets to dance and laugh together. Their unreal euphoria turns to violence as they decide to destroy the tunnel excavation that they were not allowed to work on because of their race causing a stampede that kills a large portion of the Bottom’s people. This serves as the ultimate instance and symbol of communal demise.

Fittingly, it is with the theme of cyclical history that Morrison closes *Sula*. Upon realizing the gravity of her loss after Sula’s funeral, Nel stops in the middle of the road, “the loss pressed down on her chest . . . just circles and circles of sorrow.” (Morrison 174). In this moment, Nedae and Salami see Nel as having reached an epiphany: “Nel ultimately recognizes her own guilt, her moral failure” (Nedae and Salami 128). Her long, indiscriminate cry is not an expression of solely anguish—rather, her life and loss are contained within it. Almost existentially, this cry explains the “loss of herself” (Pruitt 116), loss of a friend, loss of a lover, and loss of a community. Shame and guilt prove to be pivotal sentiments in the development of two women and the downfall of a community. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison exemplifies this through her slight magical realist bending of symbolism and tone.

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