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Sula By Toni Morrison

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Sula by Toni Morrison: A Masterpiece of Friendship, Identity, and Defiance

Toni Morrison's second novel, **Sula**, published in 1973, remains one of the most powerful and unsettling explorations of female friendship, community, and the cost of individuality ever written. Set in the impoverished, mostly Black community of the Bottom in Medallion, Ohio, the novel traces the intertwined lives of two girls, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, from their childhood in the 1920s through the aftermath of their choices in the 1960s. Morrison crafts a narrative that refuses easy moral judgments, forcing readers to sit with discomfort, ambiguity, and the profound consequences of love and betrayal. This article offers a comprehensive look into **Sula By Toni Morrison**, examining its plot, characters, themes, literary significance, and enduring relevance.

Understanding the Novel: Plot and Structure

Sula By Toni Morrison is divided into two parts, each spanning decades. The story opens with a prologue describing the Bottom's origins — a cruel joke played on a Black man by a white farmer who gave him hilly, infertile land, calling it "the bottom of heaven." This ironic foundation sets the stage for a community built on struggle and communal values, but also on rigid expectations.

Childhood and the Birth of a Bond

Nel Wright grows up in a orderly household with a controlling mother who teaches her to be respectable. Sula Peace, by contrast, lives in the chaotic Peace household ruled by her grandmother Eva, a fiercely independent woman who once sacrificed her leg for insurance money. The two girls meet and form a deep, intimate friendship that becomes the emotional core of the novel. Their bond allows them to share dreams, secrets, and a sense of completeness. A pivotal moment occurs when they accidentally cause the drowning of a young boy, Chicken Little. The boys death binds them in silence and guilt, yet it also cracks open a fissure between their developing personalities.

Adulthood and Separation

After high school, Nel marries Jude Greene, a conventional and somewhat insecure man, and settles into the expected role of wife and mother. Sula leaves the Bottom to attend college and travels the country for ten years. When she returns, she is radically changed — unapologetically independent, sexually free, and indifferent to the community's judgments. Nel, initially thrilled to have her friend back, soon finds her life disrupted. Sula has an affair with Jude, and Nel walks in on them. The friendship shatters.

The Aftermath of Betrayal

Nel cuts off contact, and Sula becomes the town's scapegoat. The community interprets every misfortune as Sula's fault, labeling her evil. Yet her presence paradoxically unites them, giving them a shared enemy. Sula eventually falls ill and dies alone, but not before a final conversation with Nel that lays bare their complicated love and resentment. Years later, Nel realizes that her grief is not for her lost husband, but for her lost friend.

The novel ends with her wailing “Sula,” acknowledging the profound hole left by the end of their connection.

Key Themes in Sula

Sula By Toni Morrison is rich with layered themes that continue to resonate. Morrison does not present simple binaries of good and evil; instead, she explores the ways communities create their own moral structures, often at the expense of those who do not conform.

Friendship and Betrayal

At its heart, the novel is a story about the complexity of female friendship. Morrison depicts the bond between Sula and Nel as an “old, old friendship” that makes each feel “unshucked.” Their connection is so deep that Sula’s betrayal with Jude feels like a violation not just of Nel’s marriage, but of their shared soul. Yet Morrison refuses to let the reader assign full blame. Sula does not sleep with Jude to hurt Nel; she does it out of a detached curiosity and a belief that their friendship could survive anything. The novel forces us to ask: is absolute honesty more valuable than loyalty? And can a friendship survive an act of profound selfishness?

Identity and Community

The Bottom community functions as a collective character. It defines itself through shared suffering, gossip, and strict codes of behavior. Sula, by refusing to marry, bear many children, or submit to community expectations, becomes a threat. She is branded as evil, yet the townspeople’s lives improve because they unite against her. Morrison suggests that communities often need an outsider to define themselves. Sula’s freedom is both liberating and terrifying. Nel, who initially chooses conformity, later realizes that her identity was built on suppressing the wild, independent part of herself that Sula represented.

Good vs. Evil in a Moral Universe

Morrison subverts traditional notions of good and evil. Sula does not perform malicious acts for pleasure; she is simply amoral, experimenting with life. When she watches her mother burn to death (an event from her childhood), she does not feel horror. When she sleeps with her best friend’s husband, she does not feel guilt. Yet Morrison also shows that the labeling of Sula as evil allows the community to ignore its own cruelties. The novel questions whether evil is an internal quality or a social construct imposed on those who challenge the status quo.

Character Analysis: The Women of the Bottom

Morrison’s characters in **Sula By Toni Morrison** are unforgettable because they are drawn with brutal honesty and compassion.

Sula Peace

Sula is the ultimate nonconformist. She is intelligent, creative, and deeply reckless. After leaving the Bottom, she returns with a different kind of vision — one that sees life as an experiment to be experienced, not a set of rules to follow. She refuses to define herself by relationships, motherhood, or community approval. Morrison deliberately leaves Sula’s motivations ambiguous. Is she a hero of self-determination or a destructive force? Perhaps both. Sula’s final conversation with Nel reveals her fear that her lack of “other people” makes her incomplete. Yet she dies unrepentant, having lived on her own terms.

Nel Wright

Nel is the foil to Sula. She is cautious, traditional, and yearns for stability. Growing up, she internalizes her mother’s lessons about respectability. Marriage to Jude gives her a defined social role, but it also suffocates her individuality. After the betrayal, she becomes a bitter, lonely woman. Her epiphany at the end — that she has been mourning Sula, not Jude — shows that her greatest loss is not her husband but the part of herself that

died when she rejected Sula. Nel's journey is one of delayed self-discovery.

Eva Peace

Eva, Sula's grandmother, is a larger-than-life figure. She built her family through sacrifice; legend says she intentionally put her leg under a train to collect insurance money. Eva is both nurturing and abusive. She killed her own son Plum because she believed he had become a hopeless addict, seeing no future for him. This act of "mercy" underscores the novel's theme that love and violence coexist. Eva embodies the hard pragmatism of Black motherhood in a world that offers no safety nets.

Literary Significance and Style

Sula By Toni Morrison is a landmark in African American literature and feminist fiction. Morrison's prose is lyrical, elliptical, and deeply symbolic. She uses folklore, myth, and biblical allusion to enrich the narrative. For example, the "plague of robins" that accompanies Sula's return to the Bottom echoes biblical plagues, casting her as a prophesied menace. The novel also experiments with time: major events (like Chicken Little's drowning) are described suddenly, almost offhandedly, reflecting how trauma can be both vivid and suppressed.

Morrison's decision to center the story on two Black women from a poor community was radical in the early 1970s, when mainstream literature often ignored or stereotyped such voices. The novel challenges readers to see the universality in specific, marginalized experiences. It also refuses to offer a comforting ending. Nel's final cry is both a lament and a recognition — an ambiguous conclusion that has sparked decades of scholarly discussion.

Why Sula Remains Relevant Today

Decades after its publication, **Sula By Toni Morrison** continues to speak to contemporary conversations about female agency, the policing of women's bodies, and the tension between individual freedom and communal responsibility. In an era of heightened awareness about the complexity of friendship and the harm of social ostracism, Sula's story feels urgent. The novel's exploration of how communities scapegoat those who deviate from norms parallels modern dynamics of cancel culture and moral panics.

Moreover, Morrison's portrayal of Black womanhood resists monolithic narratives. Sula and Nel are not archetypes; they are flawed, contradictory, and deeply human. Their story invites readers to think critically about the choices women make and the limited options available to them, especially in contexts of poverty and systemic racism. The book remains a staple in high school and college curricula, not because it offers easy lessons, but because it asks difficult questions.

Conclusion

Sula By Toni Morrison is a novel that defies simplicity. It is a story of love and loss, conformity and rebellion, and the painful gap between who we are and who we are allowed to be. Through the unforgettable characters of Sula Peace and Nel Wright, Morrison crafts a meditation on the nature of evil, the necessity of community, and the devastating consequences of suppressed individuality. Readers who enter the Bottom expecting clear heroes and villains will leave unsettled — and that is precisely the point. Sula forces us to confront the messiness of human connection and the courage it takes to live authentically, even when that authenticity isolates us. For anyone seeking a deeply rewarding literary experience, this novel remains essential reading.

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