

## ANALYSIS

*Sula* (1973)

Toni Morrison

(1931- )

“[There is] a little bit of both in each of those two women, and...if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each lacked something that the other one had.”

Toni Morrison  
in conversation with Robert Septo (1980)

“[*Sula*] was hard, for me; very difficult to make up that kind of character. Not difficult to think it up, but difficult to describe a woman who could be used as classic type of evil force. Other people could use her that way. And at the same time, I didn’t want to make her freakish or repulsive or unattractive. I was interested at that time in doing a very old, worn-out idea, which was to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms.”

Morrison  
in conversation with Robert Septo, quoted by Hortense J. Spillers  
“A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love”  
*Feminist Studies* 9.2 (Summer 1983) 323

“To have heterosexual women who are friends, who are talking only about themselves to each other, seemed to me a very radical thing when *Sula* was published in 1971...but it is hardly radical now.”

Morrison (1993)  
*The Paris Review Interviews II*  
(Picador 2007) 378

“In 1970, when Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, appeared, she reaped the benefits of a growing, middle-class women’s movement that was just beginning to acknowledge the reality of its black and poor sisters. As a result, her novel probably attracted more attention than it otherwise might have in the publishing industry and was received rather uncritically by readers and reviewers: socially conscious readers—including myself—were so pleased to see a new writer of Morrison’s obvious talent that we tended to celebrate the book and ignore its flaws.

*The Bluest Eye* was set among unforgiving provincial black people in a small Ohio town and charted the experiences of two little sisters as they watched a friend first become a pariah and then sink into madness. The book’s general outline—how witnessing and understanding tragedy forces the surrender of innocence and topples wide-eyed, precocious kids into unwilling maturity—is a familiar one in American, especially Southern, fiction; but its language was unique, powerful, precise and absolutely convincing, both spare and rich at once.

Now comes *Sula*, which features another pariah, spans the years 1921 to 1965, and seems to take place in the same setting: ‘In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood.... It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom.... They are going to raze the Time and a Half Pool Hall, where feet in long tan shoes once pointed down from chair rungs.’ While the setting and the characters continually convince and intrigue, the novel seems somehow frozen, stylized. A more precise yet somehow icy version of *The Bluest Eye*, it refuses to invade our present in the way we want it to and stays, instead, confined to its time and place.

The heroine, Sula, grows up in a household pulsing with larger-than-life people and activity, presided over by her powerful and probably sorceress grandmother. Her gentle mother is devoted almost wholly to the practice and pleasures of sensuality. But her cherished friend Nel, the local goody-goody, plays perfect counterpoint to Sula's intense, life-grabbing insistence on freedom. It's this insistence that eventually gets read as recklessness, and Sula becomes a threat as her life unfolds against the rest of the black community's daily life of hardship, humiliation and scrabbling for survival....

It's out of this that Sula emerges; she leaves the Bottom and returns 10 years later, after college and city life that we never see here, to be perceived as a sinister force, sex-hungry, man-stealing, death-dealing, a figure of darkness and betrayal. Having dared to smash the taboos that are her neighbors' poor guarantees of simply surviving, she's scorned, despised, abandoned by the people she grew out of—to their immense loss. It's possible, I guess, to talk about *Sula* as allegory—about people so paralyzed by the horrors of the past and by the demands of just staying alive that they're unable to embrace the possibilities of freedom until the moment for it has passed. But Toni Morrison's novel is too vital and rich to be confined within such limits. Her extravagantly beautiful, doomed characters are locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity, yet they are enormously, achingly alive. And this book is about them—and about how their beauty is drained back and frozen—is a howl of love and rage, playful and funny as well as hard and bitter.

When the rage gets directed at its characters as intensely as it does against the conditions that formed them, the bitterness sometimes takes over. One scene, in which the child Nel witnesses her majestic usually holier-than-thou mother cringing before a brutal, repulsive white train conductor, is close to devastating: the mother is depicted with an unsparing irony, unforgiven. Toni Morrison is someone who really knows how to clank a sentence...and her dialogue is so compressed and life-like that it sizzles. And Morrison's skill at characterization is such that, by the end, it's as if an enormous but too severely framed landscape has been unrolled and inhabited by people who seem almost mythologically strong and familiar; like the gorgeous characters of Garcia Marquez, they have a heroic quality, and it's hard to believe we haven't known them forever.

Yet the comparison can't be extended: Morrison hasn't endowed her people with life beyond their place and function in the novel, and we can't imagine their surviving outside the tiny community where they carry on their separate lives. It's this particular quality that makes *Sula* a novel whose long-range impact doesn't sustain the intensity of its first reading. Reading it, in spite of its richness and its thorough originality, one continually feels its narrowness, its refusal to brim over into the world outside its provincial setting.

As the author of frequent criticism and social commentary, Morrison has shown herself someone of considerable strength and skill in confronting current realities, and it's frustrating that the qualities which distinguish her novels are not combined with the stinging immediacy, the urgency, of her nonfiction. This last is a classically unfair carp on the part of a reviewer, but Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification 'black woman writer' and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working."

Sarah Blackburn  
*The New York Times Book Review*  
(30 December 1973)

"She constantly achieves...the 'mascon' image: *a massive concentration of Black experiential energy* which powerfully affects the meaning of Black speech, Black song, and Black poetry.... These images are emblematic of the unique social-cultural heritage of Afro-American life and have deeply resonant associations for those who have experienced them first hand. Morrison's exquisite language and subject matter embody Black experience in a way rarely achieved by Black novelists, except for masters like Hurston and Toomer.

As significant as her rootedness in Black life, is the fact that her perspective is undeniably feminine. As in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, central to the work is the relationship between young Black girls, in this case Sula and Nel who are both 12 in 1922. Although Nel comes from a home that is rigidly respectable and Sula from one that is permissively free, they mesh immediately because they are both lonely and both dreamers.... The girls share everything...until Nel marries Jude at age 17.... If Nel needs to care for someone, her future husband needs very much to be cared for. His expectations succinctly define the traditional role of wife.... The image of a woman...existing to complete a man to the exclusion of her own needs is chilling, but accurate in terms of many women's lives.

Nel chooses the conventional path of home and babies, while Sula leaves their small town for education and adventure. Ten years later she returns to raise havoc and inspire hatred in the Black people of the Bottom. Although Morrison says that she is 'classically evil,' I think that it is her unsettling nonconformity in a provincial place and time which makes her seem so wrong. Morrison explains that 'she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full rein, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her.' The reasons Morrison offers for Sula's numerous sexual encounters seem even closer to the source of her supposed wickedness....

Sula is frightening because racial and sexual circumstance has determined that she will have no way of expressing her brilliant inner fire, yet she absolutely refuses to settle for the 'colored woman's' lot of marriage, child-raising, labor and pain. I can verify the validity of Morrison's analysis. Having grown up in a family of talented women who worked as teachers in the segregated schools of the South and as domestics in the white kitchens of the North, I saw first hand the demoralizing effects of stymied intelligence and creativity. The people of the Bottom hate Sula with good reason because she is a living criticism of their dreadful lives of resignation.

To me the only case of true wickedness is Sula's casually sleeping with Nel's husband, who then takes the opportunity to desert his wife and their three children. The betrayal of the act itself is surpassed by Sula's inability to comprehend why she might have left him alone in the name of friendship. She retorts to Nel's accusations: 'I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?' Her bizarre insensitivity is consistent with her character, but I find it nearly unbearable. Morrison very skillfully gives the sympathetic readers a 'last straw' so that she too will share the town's hatred and fear.

When Sula dies at age 30, the community falls on evil times. Morrison implies that her abrasive presence served a definite cathartic purpose for a people with so few hopeful possibilities. The novel ends with Nel's discovery some 25 years later that the gray ball that had hovered just outside her field of vision ever since Jude left was not despair for him, but instead regret for the loss of Sula....The link between Black women who share each other's lives is strong. Morrison knows and feels this. She has made a book for us that is beautiful, mysterious and needed. I have only touched the surface. I loved it. Read it for yourself."

Barbara Smith  
*Freedomways* 14  
(1<sup>st</sup> quarter 1974) 69-72

"Some months ago I reviewed two books by Ed Bullins and Alice Walker, *The Reluctant Rapist* and *In Love and Trouble* (*The Nation*, November 12, 1973). I concluded that they reflected a new swing of black fiction into unexplored territory. Now that I have read Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, I am more than ever convinced that something new is happening in black writing.

Sula, Ms. Morrison's protagonist, has qualities I have seen in a fictional black female only recently. When she is 11 years old, she cuts off the tip of her finger to demonstrate to a gang of threatening boys what she can do to them if she can do that to herself. She swings a child around by the wrists and half intentionally lets him slip out of her grasp into the river, where he drowns. In the shadows of her porch, she watches in an 'interested' way while her mother burns to death.

Most of us have been conditioned to expect something else in black characters, especially black female characters—guiltless victims of brutal white men, yearning for a respectable life of middle-class security; whores driven to their profession by impossible conditions; housekeepers exhausted by their work for lazy white women. We do not expect to see a fierceness bordering on the demonic.

But that is what we're getting from some of the younger black writers. It is not a matter of race, or at least not simply a matter of race. A fascination with evil has crept into black fiction, an interest in the lower layers of the psyche of black characters, in their capacity to hurt and destroy. I don't see that this is yet a 'movement,' or even that writers like Bullins, Walker and Morrison have by deliberate plan entered these new areas. But when Bullins shows us a cool rapist or that murderous half-rodent, half-bird that slashes to death its would-be protectors; when Walker depicts an ignorant black sharecropper cutting away his daughter's breasts and blasting her with a shotgun; and when Morrison gives us a Sula, we know we are faced with something different...

It is true that Morrison operates within many of the racial commonplaces. First in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), now in *Sula*, she has staked out an area of the Midwest made familiar to us by Sherwood Anderson, the small Ohio town governed by a rigid moral prudery that dampens spontaneity and twists natural appetites. She focuses on the black sections of those towns, and, to the middle-class hypocrisy attacked by Anderson, she adds the racial prejudice of the whites. But this is the weakest strain in her novels, for it is virtually impossible to do anything fresh with a vein that has been mined to exhaustion. We begin to fidget when we see her stacking the deck against such easy marks as the bourgeoisie and reaching for the heart-strings when describing the humiliation of some proud black soldiers on a Jim Crow railroad car.

Her originality and power emerge in characters like Sula, that we have seldom seen before and that do not fit the familiar black images. One-legged Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, burns her son to death when she feels he is trying 'to crawl back into my womb.' Sula's mother, Hannah, entertains men without discrimination in the pantry of Eva's home. Sula's friend Nel realizes that she experienced a thrill of pleasure when she watched Sula's victim drown. Against the background of the respectability of black Medallion, Ohio, these acts and emotions appear as the thrust of some powerful new force, loosening the foundations of the old stereotypes and conventional manners.

Writers like Toni Morrison, like Ed Bullins and Alice Walker, are slowly, subtly making our old buildings unsafe. There is something ominous in the chilling detachment with which they view their characters. It is not that their viewpoint is amoral—we are asked for judgment. It's that the characters we judge lie so far outside the guidelines by which we have always made our judgments. For example, Morrison at first seems to combine the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and women's liberation. Sula and Nel discover when they are 11 years old 'that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them.' When they grow up, Nel slips on the collar of convention. She marries, has two children, becomes tied to her 'nest,' a slave to racism and sexism. Sula goes to the big city, gets herself an education, and returns a 'liberated' woman with a strange mixture of cynicism and innocence: 'She lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full rein, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her...hers was an experimental life.'

But the perspective Morrison gives us upon these two black women is not pure black freedom or pure women's liberation. We may wish that Nel had absorbed some of Sula's independence of mind and willingness to take risks, and had plunged so completely into the humdrum atmosphere of conventional family life, with all its sexist and racial overtones. Yet we cannot approve the freedom that licenses Sula casually to steal Nel's husband and condemn her childhood friend to a ruined life, while she just as casually abandons him. That is not freedom but selfishness, and it is immoral, however contemptuous we may be of the pitifully conventional virtues of married life, or however much we may feel that marriage oppresses women. Besides, the freedom that Sula achieves is as much a prison as it is liberation. Totally free, she becomes obsessed with herself, unable to love, uncontained by the normal rules and boundaries we have come to associate with human beings.

Morrison does not accept—nor does she expect us to accept—the unqualified tenets of either of the two current freedom movements. There is more to both society and the individual, and she subjects each of

these to a merciless analysis. The result is that neither lends itself to a clear moral judgment. For all her selfishness and cruelty, Sula's presence elicits the best in people, diluting their usual meanness and small-spiritedness. Indeed, with Sula's death the 'Bottom' dies, its black people rushing heedlessly in a comic-tragedy of communal suicide. The feeling I get from this, however, is not so much that of the familiar literary viewpoint of moral complexity as that of a calm sardonic irony over the impossibility of ever sorting out the good from the bad. This feeling gives *Sula* a portentousness that makes it perhaps an inadvertent prophet, whose prophecy is that all our old assumptions about morality are disintegrating before a peculiarly black assault against them. It is as if Morrison, and other young black writers with her, are saying, like Sula, 'If we can do this to ourselves, you can imagine what we can do to you'."

Jerry H. Bryant  
*The Nation*  
(6 July 1974)

"If there is validity in the maxim that the truth shall make us free, then Toni Morrison's *Sula* might well be regarded as a manifestation of truth, and hence, a corresponding avenue which leads toward some kind of freedom. We know the desperation of searching for truth and freedom in these perilous and confused times, but the elegant craft and intense emotional power of *Sula* remind us that our search is not new...

I am sure that some readers see Eva as a stereotyped 'Black matriarch.' She is not. The only thing Eva has in common with the Dilseys...and the hundreds of other heavy-set, Black 'domineering' mamas of traditional American literature, is that she is Black and she is the head of her household. True, Eva is a woman without a man, but she is not without men; they are there to complement that feminine, spiritual, physical and emotional part of herself...

The most powerful statement of Eva's fully developed humanity is in the description of the death of Plum, her son. Early in the structure of the novel, we glide over the curious incidents which reinforce the accepted generalizations that make us comfortable and assure us that our thinking is not abnormal: we suffer through Eva's tribulations as she tries successfully to save her children from cold, poverty, and the psychological trauma of being deserted by BoyBoy, their father. Some critics suck their teeth in that early part of the tale and attest to the limitless strength of Black women; this sets the mold for their subsequent speculations. But like the surprising truth of everyday accidents, these critics are lost when they encounter this same strong Eva in her addicted son's room, participating in a truth/freedom ritual while Plum is euphoric and close to the sublime....

People who've read *Sula* invariably begin their exploration into the mysteries of the entire work with Eva's killing of Plum. Few see Eva's deed as an act of euthanasia, primarily because we do not wish to admit that 'strong Black matriarchs' kill off their own children (except in some emotional ways). When we view the truth, however, we must focus on the symbolic meanings of life and death. To Eva, death was the ultimate reality. Having given Plum life through tremendous struggles, she could not endure his meandering in the artificial pastiche of death; she took him out of his dope-ridden misery and gave him the real thing. Present day mothers in Harlem or Atlanta or Watts or wherever have wished for a similar courage as they've watched the products of their love and suffering shrink into vegetables that would ultimately die the terrible death, foaming at the mouth and ignorant of the promise of life their mothers and fathers gave to them.

It is unlikely that Eva will ever suffer the shame or popularity of inspiring stereotypes; her truths and her freedoms cannot be confined to such restrictive characterizations. It is also doubtful that many other writers will fashion the chrysalis of universal truths with which an Eva could effectively interplay, as Toni Morrison has done. In addition to soul-wrenching testaments on the human animal, author Morrison boldly paces the wonder of God, history, and the cosmos under the artistic glass. Unabashed, she steps to the lectern through the descriptions of her characters and their musings, and makes her own judgment about man and his toys: the need for belief in God and a palpable explanation of good and evil.

The people of Medallion, denizens of a valley where 'they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course,' are like thousands of Black people all over the United States, uprooted, defrocked, and 'urban renewed'.... Eva comes from this milieu, and she is

given more respect than others in the novel whom Christians might revere. Eva understands the presence of evil, and the entire tale is a description of her methods (successful ones) to recognize, deal with, outwit and ultimately triumph over it.”

Roseann P. Bell  
*Obsidian 2*  
(Winter 1976) 93-95

“Sula is ‘freed’ by her mother’s expressed dislike of her and her own part in Chicken Little’s drowning: ‘...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 whores in *The Bluest Eye* are also freed by exclusion from society. Morrison’s suggestion that such freedom is more deprivation than fulfillment helps to explain their link with Pecola. Further, their isolation makes such free characters so unable to connect with others that they often act cruelly, out of cold detachment or fleeting impulse. Sula humiliates others ‘because she want[s] to see the person’s face change rapidly’ or watches her mother burn because she is ‘thrilled.’ Cholly rapes his daughter because he feels no ‘stable connection between himself and [his] children’....

The interdependence of the two kinds of Bad Faith, the relation between the transcendent hero and the reified victim, is suggested by the fact that both Sula and Mrs. Breedlove love the ‘power’ of the ‘position of surrender’ in sex. It also explains the collapse of the order Sula makes possible in her town; the community falls into a self-destructive orgy on Suicide Day after she dies. A hero defined solely by exclusion from the community reinforces Bad Faith by showing not a clear choosing self, but a lack of self. That is why Sula finally says, ‘I never meant anything’... When Sula meets another free person, Ajax, she is unable to sustain the relation; she lapses into the possessiveness she scorned in Nel. But when she recognizes her failure, she sees it as rooted not in Nel’s conformism but in her own isolation.”

Cynthia A. Davis  
“Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction”  
*Contemporary Literature* 23.3  
(Summer 1982) 323-42

“With the exception of a handful of autobiographical narratives from the nineteenth century, the black woman’s realities are virtually suppressed until the period of the Harlem Renaissance and later. [See first novel by black American woman, *Our Nig* (1859), by Harriet E. Wilson].... We view [*Sula*] with interest because it departs dramatically from both the iconography of virtue and endurance and from the ideology of the infamous Ogre/Bitch complex, alternately posed as the dominant traits of black female personality when the black female personality exists at all in the vocabulary of public symbols....The problem that Morrison poses in *Sula* is the degree to which her heroine (or anti-heroine, depending on one’s reading of the character) is self-betrayed....

Sula is both loved and hated by the reader.... Insofar as Sula is not a loving human being, extending few of the traditional loyalties to those around her, she reverses the customary trend of ‘moral growth’ and embodies, contrarily, a figure of genuine moral ambiguity about whom few comforting conclusions may be drawn. Through Sula’s unalterable ‘badness,’ black and female are now made to appear as a single subject in its own right, fully aware of a plenitude of predicative possibilities, for good and ill.... Sula...lives for Sula and has no wish to ‘mother’ anyone, let alone the black race in some symbolic concession to a collective need.... In Sula’s case, the old love of the collective, for the collective, is lost, and passions are turned antagonistic, since, as the myth of the black woman goes, the latter is loving only insofar as she protects her children and forgives her man....

Sula is specifically circumscribed by the lack of an explicit tradition of imagination or aesthetic work, and not by the evil force of ‘white’ society, or the absence of a man, or even the presence of a mean one. Morrison, then, imagines a character whose failings are directly traceable to the absence of...some *thing* to do... We do not see Sula in relationship to an ‘oppressor,’ a ‘whitey,’ a male, a dominant and dominating being outside the self. No Manichean analysis demanding a polarity of interest—black/white, male/female, good/bad—will work here. Instead, Sula emerges as an embodiment of a metaphysical chaos in pursuit of

an activity both proper and sufficient to herself. Whatever Sula has become, whatever she is, is a matter of her own choices, often ill-formed and ill-informed....

Toni Morrison looks forward to an era of dissensions: Sula's passions are hateful, as we have observed, and though we are not certain that the loss of conventional love brings her down, we are sure that she overthrows received moralities in a heedless quest for her own irreducible self. This radical intrusion of waywardness lends a different thematic emphasis to the woman's tale of generation, receding in Sula's awareness, and the result is a novel whose formal strategies are ambiguous and even discomfiting in their uncertainties....

When Sula comes of age, she leaves Medallion for a decade in the wake, significantly, of Nel's marriage to Jude and her resignation to staid domestic life. Sula's return to Medallion, in a plague of robins, no less, would mark the restoration of an old friendship; Sula, instead, becomes Jude's lover for a brief time before abandoning him as she does other husbands of the town. Nel and Sula's 'confrontation,' on the deathbed of the latter, tells the reader and the best friend ver little about what it is that makes Sula run. All that she admits is that she has 'lived' and that if she and Nel had been such good friends, in act, then her momentary 'theft' of Jude might not have made any difference. Nel does not forgive Sula, but experiences, instead, a sense of emptiness and despair grounded, she later discovers after it doesn't matter anymore, in her own personal loss of Sula. She has not missed Jude, she finds out that afternoon, but her alter ego passionately embodied in the other woman. It turns out that the same degree of emotional ambivalence that haunts Nel plagues the female reader of this novel. What is it about this woman Sula that triggers such attraction and repulsion at once? We have no certain answers, just as Nel does not, but, rather, resign ourselves to a complex resonance of healing which suggests that Sula is both necessary and frightening...

In the relationship between Nel and Sula, Morrison demonstrates the female's rites-of-passage in their peculiar richness and impoverishment; the fabric of paradoxes—betrayals and sympathies, silences and aggressions, advances and sudden retreats—transmitted from mother to daughter, female to female, by mimetic gesture. That women learn primarily from other women strategies of survival and 'homicide' is not news to anyone; indeed, this vocabulary of reference constitutes the chief revisionist, albeit implicit, feature of the women's liberation effort. Because Morrison has no political axe to grind in this novel—in other words, she is not writing according to a formula which demands that her female agents demonstrate a simple, transparent love between women—she is free, therefore, to pursue the delicate issue of intimate patterns of response between women. In doing so, she identifies those meanings of womanhood which statements of public policy are rhetorically bound to suppress....

*Sula* is a woman's text par excellence, even subscribing in its behavior to Woolf's intimations that the woman's book, given the severe demands on her time, is spare. The novel is less than two hundred pages of prose, but within its imaginative economy various equations of domestic power are explored. For instance, Sula's relationships to her mother Hannah and grandmother Eva Peace are portrayed in selective moments. In other words, Sula's destiny is located only in part by Nel, while the older Peace women in their indifference to decorous social behavior provide the soil in which her moral isolation is seeded and nurtured. Hannah and Eva have quite another story to tell apart from Sula's, much of it induced by Eva's abandonment by her husband BoyBoy and her awful defiance in response.

The reader is not privy to various tales of transmission between Eva and Hannah, but we decide by inference that their collective wisdom leads Hannah herself to an authenticity of person not alterable by the iron-clad duties of motherhood, nor the sweet, submissive obligations of female love. In short, Hannah Peace is self-indulgent, full of disregard for the traditional repertoire of women's vanity-related gestures, and the reader tends to love her for it—the 'sweet, low and guileless' flirting, no patting of the hair, or rushing to change clothes, or quickly applying makeup, but barefoot in summer... Just as Hannah's temperament is 'light and playful,' Morrison's prose glides over the surface of events with a careful allegiance to the riffs of folk utterance—deliberate, inclusive, very often on the verge of laughter—but the profound deception of this kind of plain talk, allegedly 'unsophisticated,' is the vigil it keeps in killing silence about what it suspects, even knows, but never expresses. This hidden agenda has a malicious side which Sula inherits without moral revision and correction....

One of the more perplexing characters of recent American fiction, Eva Peace embodies a figure of both insatiable generosity and insatiable demanding. Like Hannah, Eva is seldom frustrated by the trammels of self-criticism, the terrible indecisiveness and scrupulosity released by doubt. Because Eva goes ahead without halting, ever, we could call her fault nothing less than innocence, and its imponderable cruelty informs her character with a kind of Old Testament logic. Eva behaves as though she were herself the sole instrument of divine inscrutable will. We are not exactly certain what oracular fever decides that she must immolate her son Plum. Perhaps even his heroin addiction does not entirely explain it, but she literally rises to the task in moments of decisiveness, orchestrated in pity and judgment. Like an avenging deity who must sacrifice its creation in order to purify it, Eva swings and swoops on her terrible crutches from her son's room, about to prepare his fire. She holds him in her arms, recalling moments from his childhood before dousing him with kerosene....

Sula, who puts Eva in old age in an asylum, does not mistake her decision as a stroke of love or duty, nor does it echo any of the ambiguities of mercy. Like Eva's, Sula's program of action as an adult woman is spontaneous and direct, but the reader in Sula's case does not temper her or his angle on Sula's behavior with compassion or second thought, as she or he tends to do in Eva's case. It could be argued, for instance, that Eva sacrifices Plum in order to save him, and however grotesque we probably adjudge her act, inspired by a moral order excluding contingency and doubt, no such excuse can be offered in Sula's behalf. We must also remember that Sula's nubile *singleness* and refusal of the acts and rites of maternity have implicitly corrupted her in our unconscious judgment and at a level of duplicity which our present 'sexual arrangements' protect and mandate. We encounter the raw details of her individualism, nor engaged by naturalistic piety or existential rage, as a paradigm of wanton vanity....

Just as Hannah and Eva have been Sula's principal models, they have also determined certain issues which she will live out in her own career. It is probably not accidental that the question which haunts Hannah—have I been loved?—devolves on Sula with redoubtable fury. If it is true that love does not exist until it is named, then the answer to the enigma of Sula Peace is not any more forthcoming than if it were not so.... A revealing conversation between Eva and Hannah suggests that even for the adult female the intricacies and entanglements of mother love (or perhaps woman love without distinction) is a dangerous inquiry to engage. Hannah cannot even formulate the sentences that would say the magic words, but angles in on the problem with a childlike timidity which she can neither fake nor conceal.... The three women confirm for each other the agonies of childrearing, but can never quite bring themselves around to admitting that love is contingent and human and all too often connected with notions of duty....

Chicken Little joins Sula and Nel...in their play by the river. In the course of things Sula picked him up and 'swung' him outward and then around and around. His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened Joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter...' Frozen in a moment of terror, neither girl can do more than stare at the 'closed place in the water'.... At Chicken Little's funeral, Sula 'simply cried,' and from his grave site she and Nel, fingers laced, trot up the road...

Sula...just goes along, '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'... Sula's lack of egotism—which appears an incorrect assessment on the narrator's part—renders her an anti-passionate spectator of the human scene, even beholding her mother's death by fire in calculated coolness. Weeks after Chicken's burial Hannah is in the backyard of the Peace household, lighting a fire in which she accidentally catches herself and burns to death. Eva recalls afterward that 'she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking... Eva remains quietly convinced 'that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested...'

This moment of Sula's interestedness, and we tend to give Eva the benefit of the doubt in this case, must be contrasted to her response to Chicken's drowning, precluding us from remaining impartial judges of her behavior, even as we understand its sources in the earlier event. Drawn into a cycle of negation, Sula at twelve is Sula at twenty, and the instruments of perception which the reader uses to decipher her character do not alter over the whole terrain of the work. From this point on, any course of action that she takes is



already presumed by negating choices. Whether she steals Nel's husband or a million dollars matters less to the reader than to the other characters, since we clearly grasp the structure of her function as that of a radical amorality and consequently of a radical freedom. We would like to love Sula, or damn her, inasmuch as the myth of the black American woman allows only Manichean responses, but it is impossible to do either. We can only behold in an absolute suspension of final judgment.

Morrison induces this ambiguous reading through an economy of means, none of which relate to the classic *bete noire* of black experience—the powerful predominance of white and the endless litany of hateful responses associated with it. That Sula is not bound by the customary alliances to Naturalism or historical determinism at least tells us what imperatives she does not pursue. Still, deciding what traditions do inspire her character is not made easier....

The character of Sula impresses the reader as a problem in interpretation because, for one thing, the objective myth of the black American woman, at least from the black woman's point of view, is drawn in valorized images that intrude against the text, or compete with it like a jealous goddess. That this privileged other narrative is counterbalanced by its opposite, equally exaggerated and distorted, simply reinforces the heroics to the extent that the black woman herself imagines only one heroine—and that is herself. *Sula* attempts a correction of this uninterrupted superiority on the one hand and unrelieved pathology on the other; the reader's dilemma arises in having to choose.... Sula is not the 'other' as one kind of reading would suggest, or perhaps as we might wish, but a figure of the rejected and vain part of the self—ourselves—who in its thorough corruption and selfishness cannot utter, believe in, nor prepare for, love.... Sula's outlawry may not be the best kind, but that she has the will toward rebellion itself *is* the stunning idea. This project in liberation, paradoxically, has no particular dimension in time, yet it is for all time."

Hortense J. Spillers  
"A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love"  
*Feminist Studies* 9.2  
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"Toni Morrison's *Sula* is, in many ways, the obverse of [John] Williams's Max Reddick [in *The Man Who Cried I Am*]. If he is all activity and political passion, she is the woman who refuses to be used so that he, whoever he is and whatever the level of his success, can establish himself. *Sula* insists on *Sula*. Yet the black woman who attempts to be herself will be considered a witch by her people. The authors of that superb study *The Madwoman in the Attic* demonstrates the divisions into which male writers of previous generations located their female characters as either angels or monsters (madwomen in the attic). *Sula* is perceived as a monster, not by her author but by those, chiefly men, who judge her.

Unlike Alice Walker's *Meridian*, who functions within certain recognized systems, *Sula* breaks through all categories and insists on the same prerogatives that men obtain: sexual liberation, freedom of movement, irresponsibility, lack of social or familial commitment. *Sula* breaks from every expectation the black community has for a woman. She consciously damns herself in the eyes of others so as to prove to herself that a black woman can do what she does. At the expense of her reputation and any settled existence, she has achieved a form of personal liberation.

Morrison's point is not particularly new, although in the early 1970s it was something of a radical statement for a black woman. It foreruns the argument that Michele Wallace put together in *Black Macho*. Morrison's achievement is not only in limning liberation, however, but in making it part of a poetically evocative view of men and women. She does not vaunt *Sula* in order to pour hatred on men. Michele Wallace's delineation of black males is full of their sound and fury, their obsessive quest for sexual power. Morrison sees them as part of a context in which even as they seek their pleasure they are doomed; even as *Sula* is doomed as she seeks her pleasures. Tragically, life both allows and disallows personal choice.

*Sula*'s childhood friend, Nel Wright, early on marries Jude Greene, who becomes involved with *Sula*.... The love that slips away from Nel was never to be *Sula*'s—life itself has slipped away from her. She dies of a cancer, literally, which is her fate, although her life has not been all pain. Central to both lives is an incident that occurred when both were young girls. Playing in the woods with a little boy, Chicken Little,

Sula swings him ever faster in her arms, until, clear of land, he arches over a body of water and falls like a stone, where he drowns. The horror of the moment is preceded by moments of joy. 'His knickers ballooned and his shrieks of frightened joy startled the birds and the fat grasshoppers. When he slipped from her hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter.' The sole witness is Shadrack, a crazed black, a man so deeply affected by his World War I service he has never recovered. He, in fact, can only exorcise death by having an annual holiday which is called National Suicide Day. It takes place every January third, at first celebrated only by Shadrack, then gradually by the entire town of Medallion.

Sula grows up in Medallion in the Bottom, a piece of land originally promised to a freed slave, who thought he was getting some of the fertile valley land. But his master has said Bottom referred to 'the bottom of heaven,' the hills that intervene when God looks down on white folks in the valley. This dislocation of name and place is a metaphor for Sula, as for Shadrack, whose crazed presence runs as a leitmotif through the brief novel. Sula's choice in life, to liberate herself from stereotypical roles, is related to the isolation of the Bottom at the top, to being up in the Bottom—part of Morrison's evocation of the ironies and paradoxes she perceives as the very center of black life.

Morrison refuses to see these dislocations as forms of fate and doom; but rather as extensions of the peculiar existence all blacks must experience, places and events cohering in different ways than they do for whites. A young black girl growing up in the Bottom of Medallion has a textured experience that is unique. Sula's mother, Hannah, had serviced many of the local males, in joy, not doom; her grandmother, Eve, had poured kerosene over her beloved son, Plum, who had regressed emotionally as he grew older; and Sula is herself involved in the terrible mistake with Chicken Little. The rhythm of the novel takes its form from these unspoken events, not from economics, or politics, or any social stirrings.

Medallion is, indeed, closed off, as much as the Bottom is from the bottom, and the black worker from employment. No white world exists here, except for distant scenes of whites working on projects (roads, tunnel) denied to blacks. Blacks survive on their own, and there is a joy to it: 'the streets of Medallion were hot and dusty with progress, those heavy trees that sheltered the shacks up in the Bottom were wonderful to see.' 'Maybe it was the bottom of heaven,' and not the dregs.

Since Sula's survival rests with other blacks, she assimilates her blackness and attempts a reversal of expectations. She grows up in the twenties, leaves for ten years, returns in 1937, a new woman. The townspeople recall that when Hannah caught fire, Sula watched her mother burn, either too astonished to help or else caught in a fearful dream of expectation. They observe her as a witch, a role she has chosen to play. Sula has returned out of boredom, having found that life in the big cities is as undifferentiated as the men are. The men can speak only of love: 'Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they hooded their eyes.... She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman.' Having discovered nothing in the larger world, she returns to the smaller, to seek in Nel, her childhood friend and her secret-sharer, some kinship unobtained elsewhere.

'And like any artist with not art form, she became dangerous.' She had expected Nel to comprehend what she was trying to discover, but Nel shares the perceptions of the townspeople, viewing Sula as a pariah and refusing to understand that the black woman is fated by these very perceptions; for those with husbands 'had folded themselves into starched coffins, their sides bursting with other people's skinned dreams and bony regrets'; whereas those without husbands 'were like sour-tipped needles featuring one constant empty eye.' Once Sula returns, she and Nel become, for the time, opposites, the polarities of the black female experience.

Nel argues that as 'a woman and a colored woman at that,' Sula cannot act like a man, cannot be 'walking around all independent-like.' Sula responds that being a woman and colored is 'the same as being a man.' But Nel's trump is that Sula never had children, and if she had, she would be connected to a different set of coordinates. Sula responds by asserting that every man she knows left his children, and so her behavior would be consistent. She adds that the women she left behind were 'dying like a stump,' whereas she is 'going down like one of those redwoods'; that her loneliness is connected not to some

broken relationship but to her own making and being. 'But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you.... A secondhand lonely.'

A man is not worth keeping, she tells Nel; what counts is that inner shout of being: 'I am.' She demands something that is hers, failing to perceive that Nel has not achieved the level of consciousness to understand that. Nel's hurt is linked to her Jude's getting into bed with Sula, connected to Sula's transgression into her marriage. She cannot see that Sula has tried to get beyond routine views, beyond ordinary relationships, into areas where legality, social sanctions, and possession do not prevail. She is seeking, somewhat inchoately, a level of communication and consciousness that transcends the ordinary; and because of this, she must fail. Only after her death does Nel gain insight into her friend's effort; only then does she invoke Sula's name, in the observation that their early friendship meant everything: 'We was girls together.... O Lord, Sula...girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.' And then because of Morrison's location of the story in the Bottom, Nel can add with sad irony: 'It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.'

The man who cried 'I am' joins with the woman. Although briefly and inconclusively developed in many sections, Morrison's novel gathers its strength from its evocation. Morrison has moved outside relentless detail, beyond naturalism, toward another way of capturing what she perceives is a unique experience. In many ways, she is responding to materials like those in Shulman, Jong, Gould, Piercy, Alther, and others; but her points of reference are not by any means solely female. However significant she makes 'female equality,' she reacts to what is unique in the individual experience, to the ways in which a community can hobble that individual experience, can connect that experience to customs which, sometimes supportive, are often destructive. The individual life, she demonstrates, becomes more important, in fictional terms, than the social organism, or even the race. The narrow focus can evoke the whole, whereas frequently a broader focus loses all sense of life as lived."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 296-98

"*Sula* (1973) probes even more deeply for the origins of oppression, victimization, and social order. In the process, it also explores the possibilities for negating such control. Consistent with the dialectics of language, Morrison finds both control and its negation in naming. When a place, person, thing, or event is labeled, the namer assumes it to be fixed, present and under his or her dominion. By such a practice, experience can be organized and even reified. But in *Sula* the process of designation creates possibilities not intended by the namer, possibilities that can be realized in human history, though frequently only with great suffering. The effort to escape this dialectic, as Sula does, is doomed, as she is. She cannot avoid being part of the social order, since even rebellion is named and used in the community.

The uses of naming are developed in the book long before the title character appears. The novel opens with a 'nigger joke' associated with the origin of the black community. According to the legend, a white man promised freedom and land to his slave if a particularly difficult task were performed. When the work was done, the freedom was given without a second thought, but the land was a different matter. The white man convinced the black one that the rocky hill country was bottom land, since it was the 'bottom of heaven.' Thus, the black community of Bottom was created above the white town of Medallion. Here, as elsewhere, Morrison suggests the economic underpinnings of racism, as well as the function of language in establishing and maintaining social control. The white man manipulates the ambiguity of language to his advantage and thus determines the economic condition of blacks for generations.

But this control is not necessarily absolute: 'Still, it was lovely up in the Bottom'... Black refusal to be dehumanized by the 'nigger joke' creates the ironic realization of the joke's language'.... The second instance of control through naming comes in the form of National Suicide Day, created by Shadrack, a psychologically damaged veteran who walked through the fires of World War I. He suffered shell shock when, during a battle, 'he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier's head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from his brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with

energy and grace ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back.' The surprise and the messiness together render Shadrack nearly insane.

The bullet dissolves not merely the soldier's head but also Shad's sense of reality and identity. The world ceases to have any inherent order, and he has no name. After he leaves the hospital, 'a haven of more than a year, only eight days of which he fully recollected,' he is on his own, 'with no past, no language, no tribe...' He is deprived of all the markers of an identity, which are also the markers of a social existence. Without such possessions and the social and economic orders implied by them, he cannot be a human being. Only when he finds by accident someone who knows him, a town to live in, a job to do, and a language (that of obscenity) to speak can he begin to function. But this order cannot counteract the primal chaos of death. To live with this obsession, he must create an order for it, which he does in National Suicide Day: 'In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it [death], everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free.'

Significantly, this private neurosis becomes part of the social order: 'As time went along, the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather they thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack's annual solitary parade. In fact they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives.' Though the designation lacks for the community the traumatic significance that it holds for Shad, nonetheless its incorporation into the group's language holds [potential] meaning that will later be catastrophically realized. The mad rituals of a madman seem to be naturalized and thus neutralized by the community, but that very folk process makes the actualization of the name, though repetition, in fact feasible.

An entirely different kind of order, one that appears to be no order at all, is created by Eva, Sula's grandmother. Eva begins as the victim of a white- and male-dominated society. When she and her children are abandoned by her husband she is left with little food and no money in the middle of the winter. She saves the life of her baby by using the last of her lard to remove fecal stones from his bowels. Realizing the hopelessness of the situation, she leaves her children with a neighbor and disappears for eighteen months. When she returns, she is missing a leg but has a substantial income. The mystery of her quest becomes the material of folk legend, and she becomes a symbol of the will to survive. With the money she builds a ramshackle house and takes in boarders and various kinds of stray beings. She establishes herself as a queen, sitting on an ersatz throne constructed from a rocking chair and a children's wagon. From this position, she entertains the men of the community.

A key element in the order Eva maintains is this relationship with men. While Morrison suggests that both Eva and her daughter Hannah are enthralled by 'manlove,' the men themselves seem very much mere playthings. While Hannah expresses the idea by having intercourse with any willing man, Eva is more derogatory. Her former husband is nicknamed BoyBoy, while her son is called Plum, and an apparently white tenant Tarbaby. In the most bizarre naming, three boys she adopts are designated 'the deweys,' though they have neither appearance nor background in common. As a manifestation of Eva's power of naming, the boys become identical in mentality and sensibility; in fact, they become virtually a separate species.

In some sense, Eva sees herself as a god figure. She held the power of life and death over her children, she created the race of deweys, she names and manipulates men as she sees fit. When Plum returns from the war addicted to heroin, she chooses to destroy the remnants of his being by setting fire to him. Later on, she is punished for this hubris by having to watch helplessly as Hannah becomes accidentally engulfed in flame and then seared when neighbors throw water on her to put out the fire. Moreover, it is Eva's lack of the leg she apparently chose to sacrifice for money that makes it impossible to reach and save her daughter. Thus, the very sign of Eva's power comes to be the negation of that power.

The underlying order of which Shadrack and Eva are extreme metaphors is that of the community. It establishes the forms of male-female, parent-child, individual-society, and good-evil relationships. It creates rituals recognizing the mysteries of birth, sex, and death; it codifies acceptable attitudes toward power, whether personal, sexual, or racial. In other words, it makes the conventions that define life in the

Bottom. Morrison is her best perhaps when showing how such rites and conventions operate in ordinary experience.... But Sula refuses ordering and naming, so for the community she becomes the embodiment of evil. By ignoring or deliberately violating the conventions, she threatens the assumptions by which life in the Bottom is organized and made meaningful. By naming her evil, they seek to bring her within the framework of their worldview...

Morrison establishes early on the events that make Sula's identity an essentially negative one.... She had no center, no speck around which to grow.' For a time she has an epicenter of sorts in Nel, her girlhood friend. Some of the best passages are devoted to the rites of passage they go through together. Their experiences of emerging womanhood, of personal bonds, of death and guilt are very effectively rendered. Ultimately, however, a break must come, for Nel eventually defines herself by community conventions, while Sula exists outside such structures. Nel's wedding, which marks the end of part 1, is the occasion of the break. It marks the moment at which Nel actualizes her underlying desire for order by making an identity through a man rather than through herself: 'The two of them together would make one Jude.' From this point on, Nel becomes one of the voices of the community; the last of the novel is built around her position as one who has some understanding of Sula, yet who cannot see the world in the same way. She serves, then, as a character in the middle, between the polarities of Sula and the community.

Nel's ambivalent position becomes clear early in part 2, when Sula returns after a ten-year absence. The marriage to Jude has been frustrating in large part because of his inability to find rewarding work in a white-dominated economic system. These frustrations become self-pity which Nel is expected to nurse, in both senses of healing and feeding. Sula, however, cannot take such an attitude seriously: 'I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates....' She does not permit an identity created by oppression or self-hatred. By this method she restores laughter and perspective to both Nel and Jude.

The same disregard for social convention leads to the desolation of both the marriage and the friendship. Because she finds Jude interesting, Sula entices him into sexual play that is discovered by Nel. Having no sense of possessiveness or conventionalized identity, Sula feels no responsibility either to her friend's marriage or to Jude's need for love. Truly amoral, she can understand neither Nel's humiliation and outrage nor the husband's desire to leave. For this crucial part of the story, Morrison shifts to Nel's perspective. This point of view makes it possible to see another character's experience of absence as an experience much different from that of Sula.

The loss of Jude is the loss of identity and the loss of life. More specifically, it is the loss of what filled her thighs that has deprived her of identity. Jude's penis was her life, both personally and socially. Whatever the conditions of the marriage, having his name and his body gave her an acceptable place in the community. The absence of the phallus means a loss of status in the social order. She now becomes a 'woman without a man' and unable to raise her eyes. For this change she blames Sula, who, without a sense of ownership, cannot conceive of Jude as an object to be taken. Nel's private experience is a metaphor for the community's treatment of alien behavior. Sula's refusal of positive identity cannot be tolerated, so she is explained as a demon. A folklore is created that includes both tales of her evil actions and interpretations of 'signs' associated with her. Like her mother, she has sexual intercourse indiscriminately with the men of the Bottom. But unlike Hannah, her behavior is seen as arrogant rather than complimentary. Without evidence, she is accused of having had liaisons with white men, which is considered the essence of degradation. Her decision to put Eva into a nursing home is attacked, with everyone ignoring the old woman's previous behavior.

The 'signs' are the means of objectifying the general feeling of distaste. They become the evidence necessary to fit Sula negatively into the social order. The 'plague' of robins that accompanies her return is taken as an omen. Accidents are said to be caused by certain dark practices in which she engages. The most important of the signs is the birthmark over her eye. Each observer reads it in such a way as to validate his or her own interpretation of Sula's identity. When she was a child, it is seen as a rose bud. Jude, believing her both threatening and enticing, sees it as a snake. Shadrack, who fishes for a living and who thinks of her a kindred alien spirit, sees it as a tadpole. The community reads it as ashes, symbolizing both her presumed

indifference to her mother's fiery death and her association with hellish forces. The assignment of meaning to an accident of pigmentation makes it possible to bring Sula within a structure set up by the interpreter. Bringing her in, even as evil, brings her under control. 'There was no creature so ungodly as to make them destroy it. They could kill easily if provoked to anger, but not by design, which explained why they could not 'mob kill' anyone. To do so was not only unnatural, it was undignified. The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over'...

To make her *their* evil was to limit and explain the damage she could do. To recognize her as truly different and alien would be to accept discontinuity, disorder, and absence. She must be named so as to render her power manageable. She came to serve an important function in the community as a scapegoat. She took on for them the evil they had previously done to each other. They became righteous as a way of defining themselves as different from her. Mothers previously indifferent to their children became fearful and then protective as stories of Sula's evil power spread. Wives threatened by her promiscuity became more attentive to their husbands. The group banded together for good now that it had to evade consciousness of the true oppressors: death and white society.

Nel, though conventional enough to blame Sula for robbing her of her marriage and thereby both her happiness and her identity, does not engage so directly in the social fantasy. Instead, she creates a new identity that equates her suffering with goodness. Thus, when she learns that Sula is dying, she goes to her out of Christian charity, but not out of friendship. What she learns at the bedside again disturbs the center around which she has organized her life. Sula shows not gratitude or remorse, but a candor that is disorienting. When Nel demands an explanation for the affair with Jude, she is told that it was merely a passing fancy. And when she attempts a moral definition of friendship, the response is even more troubling: '...It matters, Nel, but only to you. Not anybody else. Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it.' Finally, Sula even asserts that perhaps she, not Nel, was the one who was good.'

For years, Nel manages to evade the implications of this confrontation. She escapes her own responsibility for self-creation and action by believing that she has been a mere victim. Like the community, she achieves a false innocence by constructing a moral hierarchy with herself at the top and Sula at the bottom. To use the language of *The Bluest Eye*, both she and the Bottom clean themselves on Sula. But such a stance cannot be maintained in the realities of the concrete historical world. The death of Sula, taken to be a sign of better times, brings trouble for the community. Unable to use the strength of the evil one, the people fall back into their selfish, antagonistic ways. The condition is exacerbated when jobs promised by the whites in power do not materialize. On Suicide Day, frustrated citizens join Shad's parade, which ends at the construction site. Here their anger is vented in destruction of the tunnel, with the attendant deaths of dozens of people.

For Nel, the impact is delayed and results in insight rather than cataclysm. As an expression of her goodness, she visits the women in the nursing homes. Twenty-five years after Sula's death and the mass death at the tunnel, she goes to see Eva. Though the old woman is senile, she still makes disturbing observations, such as identifying Nel with Sula, and accusing her of participation in Chicken Little's drowning. Though Nel denies complicity, the accusation has an effect because she was there and did nothing to prevent the death. Thus, Eva, like her namesake, forces on another the knowledge of good and evil and thereby brings Nel out of her self-created innocence into the world of history, experience, and responsibility. The mark of this fortunate fall is her embrace of the spirit of Sula....

The cry is 'fine' because it is not self-protective or dehumanizing. It expresses sorrow for what had not merely been lost but thrust away through a desire to control and order one's experience. Its lack of conventional structure—no bottom and no top—makes possible the natural and human order of circles, which accepts absence as absence, irreducible yet infinitely meaningful. Nel achieves her true humanity by giving her emptiness its rightful name. This right name makes possible insight but not manipulation; as nearly pure blues expression, it offers not domination but a working through to the truth of experience."

Keith E. Byerman  
"Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison"

*Fingering the Jagged Grain:  
Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction  
(U Georgia 1985) 184-216*

“In her greatest novel so far [1987], *Sula*, she succeeded amazingly at making this crucial shift in atmosphere. Here characters suffer—from their own limitations and the world’s—but their inner life miraculously expands beyond the narrow law of cause and effect. In *Sula*, Morrison found a way to offer her people an insight and sense of recovered self so dignified and glowing that no worldly pain could dull the final light. The novel ends with a song which soars over the top of its own last word, ‘sorrow’.”

Ann Snitow  
*The Village Voice Literary Supplement*  
(September 1987)

“The growing bond between Nel Wright and Sula Mae Peace as well as their complementary personalities are first revealed to us by the contrasting features of the land. Two key terrestrial images frame the novel: the hillside signifying the creation of the black community of Medallion, Ohio, known as the Bottom (through the chicanery of a white planter unwilling to fulfill his promise of valley land to an industrious and newly emancipated slave), and a tunnel under construction at New River Road that collapses upon participants in Shadrack’s last march to commemorate National Suicide Day....

One reading of these two regions suggests they have male and female characteristics: the phallic hillside and the vaginal tunnel, particularly when one recalls that the Bottom was established as a black community through a barter between two men. But Morrison gives the two regions feminine traits and infuses them with a preponderance of female properties, in the dual sense... The hillside is nurturing; it is a veritable breast of the earth. Within a feminine figuration (accompanying the narrative of a nurturing friendship between Nel and Sula) the hillside complements rather than contrasts with the womblike tunnel, which upon ‘breaking water’ becomes a haunting, unsuspecting grave when several Bottom luminaries drown. This ‘abortion’ of life occurs right at the time Medallion is undergoing a kind of rebirth through urban renewal. Whites and blacks are changing geographical spaces: the former moving to the cooler hills, the latter descending to the crowded valley floor. This change and death reverse the notion of economic upward mobility for Medallion blacks, who have only a promise of work on New River Road, and foreshadow the further decline, or bottoming *out*, of the community....

The double figuration of the land as a framing device also foreshadows the novel’s curiously double closure. One ending, effected by Shadrack’s haunting, successful celebration of death, culminates in his search for a ‘place for fear’ as a way of ‘controlling it’ and brings his social marginality to a shocking conclusion. A second ending, however, forces the reader to revise this reading of the novel. Nel’s visit to the elderly Eva, now in a nursing home, picks up the unfinished business between Nel and Sula (here represented by Eva) with shattering results: Nel is forced to acknowledge the guilt she shares with Sula for the accidental drowning of Chicken Little who had slipped from Sula’s swinging hands and had entered the ‘closed place of the water.’ The scene also foreshadows the tunnel’s sudden collapse....

At first Sula’s birthmark is described as a ‘stemmed rose’; as she matures, it becomes a ‘stem and rose,’ suggesting the duality in nature as well as Sula’s developing thorny yet attractive personality. With age, the mark becomes ‘the scary black thing over her eye.’ When Jude begins to see the mark as a ‘copperhead’ and a ‘rattlesnake,’ he is seduced by Sula. And as Sula becomes the evil the community fears yet abides... No one, not even Nel, knows Sula’s heart.... Sula’s real character, however enigmatic, comes from this community, this Medallion.... Sula, who had returned to Medallion during a plague of robins, also years for flight as the fulfillment of the self-creation she thought she had achieved. In the upper room, now the setting for her ardent lovemaking with Ajax, Sula discovers her human frailty (sexual possessiveness and emotional vulnerability). It is also the place where she dies....

Flight appears in Morrison’s oeuvre as early as *The Bluest Eye*.... Sula’s own quest for height and power through performance occurs in Eva’s third floor bedroom. Mounted *on top of* Ajax in their lovemaking, Sula ‘rocked there, swayed there, like a Georgia pine on its knees, high above...’ Sula’s

discovery of height and freedom confirming her self-centered identity and place is only partially realized because the milk-bearing Ajax, in a gesture of sexual nurture, counters her contrived image of flight with a more realistic, attainable one of his own.... Sula has indeed met her match.

Moreover, Ajax shows her how trivial, self-indulgent, and incomplete is Sula's notion of the 'free fall,' which she felt made her different from Nel, whose imagination had been driven 'underground' by her repressive mother, and from the other women of Medallion. Ajax's presence heightens Sula's self-contradictions as he effectively matches her false, showy nonconformity with his more authentic eccentricity: he is the son of a conjurer mother, and his knowledge of magic and lore surpasses Sula's allure. Here Morrison's prevailing metaphor of flight begins with a leap, or free fall, and offers a rectifying alternative to Ellison's idea of hibernation. As Sula hibernates on the upper floor at 7 Carpenter Road, not in an underground cellar, she longs for the kind of performance that would complete her discovery of self-mastery and complete control. This metaphor is hinted at in *The Bluest Eye*, sketched out and challenged by Ajax in *Sula*, and finds its fullest, if not most conclusive statement in *Song of Solomon*.

The relation between Sula and Nel ruptures when Sula interprets Nel's possessiveness of her husband, Jude, to mean that Nel is one of *them*, the conventional housewives of Medallion. Nel had earlier shared Sula's vision of 'the slant of life that makes it possible to stretch [life] to its limits.' Becoming the cliched wronged wife, outraged at Jude and Sula's adultery, Nel is too quickly linked with other women in the community who had 'interpreted' Sula as incarnating some kind of evil. They had measured themselves morally and socially by abiding 'evil'—as Pauline Breedlove did with Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*—and garnering a false dignity, even heroism, by tolerating it: 'The purpose of evil was to survive it.' When Nel shows her natural jealousy and hurt, she begins to belong, in Sula's view, 'to the town and all of its ways'....

'Dangerous' more than evil is an accurate description of Sula. As an 'artist with no art form' Sula is vulnerable to the shifting interpretations of the only form she carries in her very being: her birthmark. Like Hannah, Sula's art lay in lovemaking, in her enjoyment of the sheer abandon of sex. This clearly is how Sula makes the leap from sexual conventions that lead to marriage and braves the outer limits of promiscuity, the ultimate breach of which is to have sex with white men. It was through carefree sex, nonetheless, that Sula found the cutting edge and the leap of free fall, her performance....

Perhaps it is Ajax who can lift Sula from the ground, or perhaps she will lift him up into the flight and transcendence he also seeks. The only uncertainty is Sula's inability to let herself to and to release Ajax from the confining domesticity of housebound sex. Sula fails. Her wish for total freedom, for flight, becomes as much a delusion as Pecola's blue eyes.... The illusory nature of Sula's desire is revealed in the contrast between her and Ajax, who, like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* or Buster and Riley in Ellison's story 'That I Had Wings,' yearns for freedom through aviation. Although Ajax's dream is realized only in his frequent trips to airports, he establishes a degree of realism against Sula's illusion of control and flight through sex. (It is he who requests that she mount him.) He thinks equally about his conjurer mother and airplanes... The blue bottle of milk offered to Sula as a trophy connects her to the blue sky and the maternal milk. Flight and aviation as the exercise of creativity, the fulfillment of perfect control, hold both Sula and Ajax in its cobalt blue glow.

Yet the moment that Sula falls in love with Ajax and discovers possessiveness, both she and Ajax are more grounded than either desires. Ajax escapes this confinement by losing interest in Sula, but she remains trapped, totally overwhelmed by feeling human and vulnerable. When she takes Ajax through her newly cleaned house...she shows him her nest, a space for hibernation, nurture, and fulfillment of sexual desire. Ajax makes love to her in the more conventional position, but he thinks less about Sula than 'the date of the air show in Dayton.' Sula is 'under' him now, and he moves 'with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton.'

In his stunning absence, Sula tries to come to terms with her love for Ajax... Like Pecola, Sula is weighted down by the human, emotional vulnerability she succumbs to, particularly the self-willed grief she hibernates in, shut away in Eva's room. Like Cholly Breedlove, Sula reaches a momentary height of self-awareness in her admission of loneliness and possessiveness of Ajax (particularly when she realizes



she never really possessed him, for she never knew his name), but she fails to give voice to this spark of self-recognition. Hence, her freedom is never fully realized. Her flight is not only aborted, but Sula also dies.... Sula succumbs to the 'hollow,' as Plum did at the 'hole' of sleep, because she could not give adequate voice and action to her vision. Instead of flying, she descends to the loam of the very land that had marked her from birth.

Sula's death offers no 'invention,' only descent; it is neither a free fall nor the redeeming flight she had longed for. One clue to her decline lies in Morrison's verbal design of Sula's place of hibernation, Eva's room with its blind window, boarded up indirectly by Sula herself. Sula's paralyzing interest in watching her mother Hannah burn necessitated Eva's leap of rescue out of that window. When Sula subsequently dispossesses Eva of that room, she puts herself in the physical, but not the emotional, space for the reconciliation Eva had attempted in her failed rescue of Hannah, and, paradoxically, in her mercy killing of Plum—to keep him from descending further into the stupor of drugs, or reducing his already fragile maturity to the helpless state of an infant wanting a return to the womb.

Instead of a womb, Eva offered Plum the scent and vision of the eagle's wings. Instead of flight, Eva's upper room offers Sula the best setting for the only performance she is then capable of; her foetal plunge down an imaginary birth canal or tunnel (prefiguring the town's later disaster) is a perversion of the rebirth in death that Eva had granted Plum.... Sula's plunge into the tunnel following a period of willful hibernation completes the solitude she had always wanted. This hibernation, however, had rendered her immobile, incapacitated (except in death), for Ajax's departure and Sula's recognition of her human vulnerability stun her into physical and emotional paralysis. This backfire, or boomerang, reverses the moment of moral strength Eva felt in her husband BoyBoy's desertion, and now Eva, as a discerning, combative ancestor, cannot help Sula, for Eva has been safely locked away....

Both Sula and Shadrack have presided over figurations of the land that reveal underground refuge or hibernation to be the simple burial it is, which is what Wright's Fred Daniels discovered. Hibernation, despite the subversive bravura of Ellison's invisible man, does not lead to the effective overt activity or self-assertion he had promised. Morrison's more complex rendering of place and person in the collapse of the tunnel and the spirals of grief that bind Nel to repetitions of guilt, necessitates an end to hibernation, whether underground or three floors up. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison offers the corrective reach of the mountaintop and a triumphant surrender to the air."

Melvin Dixon

"Like an Eagle in the Air: Toni Morrison"

*Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*  
(U Illinois 1987) 141-69

"*Sula*, her second book, which Morrison calls a novel about black women's friendships, and about good and evil, appeared in 1973. *Sula* not only breaks with popular stereotypes of black women in western literature, but creates one of the few black women heroines to deliberately embrace the role of pariah. Although not universally liked, *Sula* had a wider reception than *The Bluest Eye*, and brought Morrison national recognition. Black women and men were widely represented among its critics, with black women identifying most often with the issues that it raised.... Most readers had negative responses to this book. Black journalist Margo Jefferson, writing in *Ms.*, was an exception. She recognized the complexity of the characters in both of Morrison's early books and called them 'rich, confident'."

Nellie Y. McKay, ed.

*Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*  
(G. K. Hall 1988) 4

"The chapter headings in *Sula* suggest that it simply moves chronologically from 1919 to 1965. Memory, however, plays an important role even here. The people of Medallion keep alive, through attitude and behavior, the bizarre history of Sula's family and the town. Shadrack, Sula, and Nel, are bound together by their memory of and silence about the circumstances of Chicken Little's death. It is this secret, harbored and interpreted by each according to his or her needs, that rushes in at the end of the novel to clarify the character of each as well as the real nature of their connection. The last chapter of the novel moves fluidly from Nel's memories of Chicken Little's death and Sula's funeral to Shadrack's memories as

it brings into sharp focus the final revelations: the nature and meaning of Sula, Shadrack, and the people of Medallion.”

Margaret B. Wilkerson  
“The Dramatic Voice in Toni Morrison’s Novels”  
*Critical Essays* (1988) 184

“*Sula* opens up new literary and critical options, not only for the study of texts by Afro-American women, but for Afro-American literary study more generally. The novel certainly helps to set a new agenda for black women’s social and narrative possibilities. Coming significantly on the heels of the Black Power Movement that rendered black women prone or the ‘queens’ of the male warrior—an updated version of a familiar script—the narrative invites the reader to imagine a different script for women that transcends the boundaries of social and linguistic convention.... Morrison’s transgression begins with questioning traditional notions of SELF as they have been translated into narrative. She implicitly critiques such concepts as ‘protagonist,’ ‘hero,’ and ‘major character’ by emphasizing decentering and deferring the presence of Sula, the title character. Bearing *her* name, the narrative suggests that she is the protagonist, the privileged center, but her presence is constantly deferred. We are first introduced to a caravan of characters: Shadrack, Nel, Helene, Eva, the Deweys, Tar Baby, Hannah, and Plum before we get any sustained treatment of Sula. Economical to begin with, the novel is roughly one-third over when Sula is introduced and it continues almost that long after her death.

Not only does the narrative deny the reader a ‘central’ character, but it also denies the whole notion of character as static essence, replacing it with the idea of character as process. Whereas the former is based on the assumption that the self is knowable, centered, and unified, the latter is based on the assumption that the self is multiple, fluid, relational, and in a perpetual state of becoming. Significantly, Sula, whose eyes are ‘as steady and clear as rain,’ is associated throughout with water, fluidity.... Sula never achieves completeness of being. She dies in the fetal position welcoming ‘this sleep of water,’ in a passage that clearly suggests, she is dying yet aborning....

As doubles, Sula and Nel complement and flow into each other, their closeness evoked throughout the narrative in physical metaphors.... The two are likened to ‘two throats and one eye.’ But while Sula and Nel might share a common vision (suggested by ‘one eye’), their needs and desires are distinct (they have ‘two throats’)... Like so many women writers, Morrison equates marriage with the death of the female self and imagination. Nel would be the ‘someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up...the two of them would make one Jude.’ After marriage she freezes into her wifely role, becoming one of the women who had ‘folded themselves into starched coffins.’ Her definition of self becomes based on the community’s ‘absolute’ moral categories about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women, categories that result in her separation from and opposition to Sula.

The narrative anticipates that opposition in one of its early descriptions of Nel and Sula. Nel is the color of ‘wet sandpaper,’ Sula is the ‘heavy brown,’ a distinction that can be read as patriarchy’s conventional fair lady/dark woman, virgin/whore dichotomy, one reflected in Sula’s and Nel’s separate matrilineages. Sula’s female heritage is an unbroken line of ‘manloving’ women who exist as sexually desiring subjects rather than as objects of male desire.... Nel’s sexuality is not expressed in itself and for her own pleasure, but rather, for the pleasure of her husband and in obedience to a system of ethical judgment and moral virtue, her ‘only mooring’.... [Is there no marital *love* in Morrison?] Sula, on the other hand, ‘went to bed with men as frequently as she could’ and assumed responsibility for her own pleasure....

Because of her community’s rigid norms for women, Sula’s impulses cannot be absorbed. Without an ‘art form,’ her ‘tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor’ become destructive. Without art forms, Sula is the artist become her own work of art. As she responds defiantly to Eva’s injunction that she make babies to settle herself, ‘I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.’ Because she resists self-exploration [adultery?], such creativity is closed to Nel.... Whereas Sula is an ambiguous character with a repertoire of responses along a continuum and thus cannot be defined as either totally ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ Nel’s is a limited response: ‘goodness,’ ‘rightness,’ as her name ‘Wright’ suggests. As it is classically defined for women ‘goodness’ is sexual faithfulness, self-abnegation, and the idealization of marriage and motherhood.... [Nel is “limited” because she is not “bad,” as when drowning the little boy?]

After years of repression, Nel must own her complicity in Chicken Little's drowning, a complicity that is both sign and symbol of the disowned piece of herself. She recalls... 'the good feeling she had when Chicken Little's hands slipped'... That remembrance makes space for Nel's psychic reconnection with Sula as a friend as well as symbol of that disowned self. Significantly, that reconnection occurs in the cemetery, a metaphor for Nel's buried shadow. The 'circles and circles of sorrow' she cried at the narrative's end prepare her for what Sula strained to experience throughout her life: the process of mourning and remembering that leads to intimacy with the self, which is all that makes intimacy with others possible. And the reader must mourn as Nel mourns, must undergo the process of development that Nel undergoes. And as with Nel, that process begins with releasing the static and coherent conception of SELF and embracing what Sula represents: the self as process and fluid possibility [selfishness?]....

*Sula* threatens the readers' assumptions and disappoints their expectations at every turn. It begins by disappointing the reader's expectations of a 'realistic' and unified narrative documenting black/white confrontation. Although the novel's prologue, which describes a community's destruction by white greed and deception, gestures toward 'realistic' documentation, leads the reader to expect 'realistic' documentation of a black community's confrontation with an oppressive white world, the familiar and expected plot is in the background. In the foreground are the characters whose lives transcend their social circumstances.... The narrative is neither an apology for Sula's destruction nor an unsympathetic critique of Nel's smug conformity. It does not reduce a complex set of dynamics to a simple opposition or choice between two 'pure' alternatives....

Not only does the narrative disappoint the reader's expectation of correct answers and appropriate judgment, but it also prevents a stable and unified reading of the text.... The novel's fragmentary, episodic, elliptical quality helps to thwart textual unity, to prevent a totalized interpretation. An early reviewer described the text as a series of scenes and glimpses, each 'written...from scratch.' Since none of them has anything much to do with the ones that preceded them, 'we can never piece the glimpses into a coherent picture.' Whatever coherence and meaning resides in the narrative, the reader must struggle to create.... The reader must fill in the narrative's many gaps, for instance: Why is there no funeral for either Plum or Hannah? What happens to Jude? Where was Eva during her eighteen-month absence from the Bottom? What really happened to her leg? How does Sula support herself after she returns from her ten-year absence?"

Deborah E. McDowell  
"The Self and the Other":  
Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text" (1988)  
*Critical Essays* (1988) 77-90

"*Sula* as well features a scapegoat-protagonist, although Sula clearly cultivates those qualities that distinguish her from her neighbors... Sula, unlike Pecola, chooses her isolation, [and] it is precisely that distance that destroys her.... She thus defies social restraints with a vengeance.... Worst of all in her neighbors' judgment, she discards men, black and white, as rapidly as she sleeps with them, even the husband of her best friend, Nel.... Sula's story stands in analogous relation to Shadrack's.... The communal response to Sula is identically Shadrack's response to the unexpected.... The people of the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio, ridicule Shadrack's holiday, but their survival, like his, depends upon finding ways of controlling their terrors.... Like Eva, the townspeople find a sign or a reason for their trouble after the fact. Their retrospective justifications are finally no different from Shadrack's....

The townspeople actually become more generous when they shun Sula because they assign to her their own baser impulses...As several critics have argued, Sula and Nel complement each other psychologically, and neither is fully herself after geography, and Sula's relation to Jude, separate them.... Sula's family is the source of her independence of mind and sexual nonchalance.... Haunted by the image of her own mother, a prostitute, Nel's mother tries to launder the 'funk' out of her daughter's life. During their childhood and adolescence, Nel provides Sula with restraints, and Sula offers Nel license.... Their relationship is permanently destroyed when Sula sleeps with Jude, although Sula reflects that she never intended to cause Nel pain. Without Nel, 'the closest thing to both an other and a self,' Sula is cut off from the only relation that endowed her life with meaning, and she drifts to her death.... By characterizing her as

both a scapegoat and the second self of her more conventional best friend, Morrison denies Sula the originality she seeks.”

Valerie Smith

“*Song of Solomon: Continuities of Community*” (1993)  
*Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*  
eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah  
(Amistad 1993) 276-78

“Overtly, the novel is divided into an introduction, two parts—one devoted to years in the twenties, to Sula and Nel’s growing up, and the other to years in the late thirties and early forties, to these women, now grown—and finally, as if an epilogue, there is 1965, a year of remembrance and understanding for Nel Greene. But Morrison immediately signals her reader that this tale about the friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace is integrally related to the survival of their community. The novel begins not with the presentation of these characters, but with the death of their hometown. In *Sula*, as in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison uses the motif of inversion, of derangement, as the natural order is turned upside down as a result of human society....

The Bottom, the Negro neighborhood of the town Medallion, was a white man’s gift of land to a slave who had performed some heavy duties for him. Although the Bottom was really hill land where planting was backbreaking and the weather harsh, the master had persuaded the slave that this land was more desirable than the valley land, that it was called the Bottom because it was the bottom of Heaven—‘best land there is.’ Inverted, the truth is inverted, and so the Bottom on the top came to be.... [In] the last chapter of the novel, ‘1965’...some of the folk had moved from the Bottom only to realize too late that hill land had become valuable. In terms of monetary value, it had become, in fact, what the white farmer had told his slave a hundred years before, ‘the bottom of Heaven’....

The mythological tone of this tale is heightened further by Morrison’s pervasive use of nature images. Throughout *Sula*, images of fire, water, wind and earth are closely linked to the eternal presence of death and the Bottom’s concept of time. As a result, the novel projects an integral world view, for the qualities of creativity and destructiveness are continually transforming the images of nature.... While the structural elements of Death, Time, and Nature unify the novel, the story of the Wright women and the Peace women specify the community’s perception of itself, for its view of women is inexorably connected to its concept of survival. Part I of this patterned tale emphasizes the myriad forms of woman’s behavior that the community incorporates, even as it dramatizes the beginnings of Nel and Sula’s friendship. In using these two very different families, the author dramatizes not only the levels of this community’s tolerance in relation to women but also its spiritual richness and poverty....

Part I explored the many styles of women’s behavior that the Bottom is willing to absorb, while it traces the friendship of Nel and Sula as young girls. In contrast, Part II emphasizes the forms that this community will not tolerate, while it examines the friendship and estrangement of Nel and Sula as adult women. Foremost to Part II is the Bottom’s concept of evil, for that is the way in which they characterize intolerable behavior.... In the chapter ‘1939,’ Sula and Ajax’s relationship is killed by Sula’s attempt to possess Ajax. In 1940 Sula dies physically, but we feel to some extent that her death is due to spiritual malnutrition as much as any physical cause. In 1941 a significant number of folk in the Bottom are killed in their attempt to destroy the tunnel that they were not allowed to build. In effect they bring about their own deaths because they have been spiritually as well as physically drained by poverty, harsh weather, and starvation—a powerlessness.... From the year 1937, when Sula returns to the Bottom, to the year 1940, when she dies, a presence charges the Bottom with an energy....

It is with maddening recognition that we grasp Sula’s tragedy—she is too full, and yet too static, to grow. She has stared into that abyss where nothing in life can be relied on—where nothing really matters. Like Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, she has developed the freedom of narcissism allowed only to the gods. Such freedom is not allowed to mere mortals as the oldest stories of all cultures testify.... Sula and Ajax’s love relationship emerges as the fullest communication between a man and woman in Morrison’s works. As persons they are well suited to each other.... They love each other; in that they find another version of themselves in each other, at least for awhile....

Although Nel and Sula have taken opposite paths, they are both dying. But Nel is dying, as Sula says, 'like a stump,' while Sula feels that she is 'going down like one of those redwoods'.... Sula had lived gloriously before she was struck down; Nel, on the other hand, endures physically, but only at the price of never having fulfilled herself.... Although Sula dies, Morrison does not want us to conclude that the philosophy of the Bottom is superior.... If anything, her absence makes things worse, for without a pariah, the folk revert to not caring about each other. What becomes clear is that Nature will always inflict disasters on them...

If Eva has got any of the traditional mammy qualities, it is that she is domineering, without any reason to feel that she should be otherwise. She does as she pleases. As a mother she had given life, and so when her son Plum returns from the war and attempts to 'crawl back into her womb,' she acts in her usual decisive manner; she burns him to death. Her explanation to Hannah for her actions reverberate with the hidden power inherent in the act of creativity, the power to destroy.... Like the primeval Earth Mother Goddess, feared and worshipped by man, like the goddess of antiquity, older even than the biblical Eve, Eva both gives life and takes it away. She performs a ritual killing inspired by love—a ritual of sacrifice by fire." [Compare this to Sethe killing her child in *Beloved*]

Barbara Christian  
"The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison"  
*Critical Perspectives* (1993) 74-78, 79, 83-85, 87, 90-94

"As Morrison sees it, the most serious threat to black culture is the obliterating influence of social change. The opening line from *Sula* might well have been the novel's conclusion, so complete is the destruction it records: 'In that place, where they tore the night shade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood.' This is the community Morrison is writing to reclaim. Its history, terminated and dramatically obliterated, is condensed into a single sentence whose content spans from rural South to urban redevelopment. Here, as throughout Morrison's writing, natural imagery refers to the past, the rural South, the reservoir of culture that has been uprooted—like the blackberry bushes—to make way for modernization. In contrast, the future as perceived of as an amorphous, institutionalized power embodied in the notion of 'Medallion City,' which suggests neither nature nor a people.... The neighborhood defines a Northern social mode rather than a Southern one, for it describes the relationship of an economic satellite...

In a novel whose opening describes the leveling of a neighborhood and its transformation into the Medallion City Golf Course, Shadrack's experience of bodily fragmentation is the psychological equivalent of annihilating social upheaval, which he was subjected to as an army draftee.... Shadrack's imagined physical deformity is a figure for the equally monstrous psychological and social transformations that capitalism in all its modes (slavery, the military, and wage labor) has inflicted on the minds and bodies of black people. Shadrack's affirmation of self, arising out of the moment he sees his image reflected in a toilet bowl and beholds the solid and profound reality of his blackness, ranks as one of the most powerful literary statements of racial affirmation.... As both messiah and pariah, Shadrack is marginal, accepted by, but never assimilated into, the black community. He, like Sula and Morrison's other social pariah, Soaphead Church, provides a point of perspective on the community that is both inferior and exterior; he allows the community to define itself against a form of freedom, which being a social unit, it cannot attain. Morrison's characters demonstrate that the black community tolerates difference, whereas the white bourgeois world shuts difference out."

Susan Willis  
"Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison"  
*Critical Perspectives* (1993) 315, 321

"Set between 1919 and 1965, *Sula* is clearly located in the generation of Morrison's mother and grandmother and not in her own.... Sula and Nel are presented as members of a new generation of black women, eager to construct new lives and new stories for themselves. Yet their development and their friendship, and the text itself, revolve around their relationships to the powerful maternal figures who come to represent a female past, and around their attitude to maternity itself.... Mothers have ceased to be able to

care for sons in the increasingly feminized, though clearly sexual, culture Morrison constructs. Even Ajax's mother, the 'conjure woman,' cannot keep her son from abandoning her and Sula....

The dominating maternal presence in the novel is, of course, the matriarch Eva who rules over the enormous house in which Sula and Nel spend a great deal of their childhood. Ironically, Eva's powerful presence is defined by lack, her amputated leg which becomes the means of her survival and the mark of her distinction from the other poor and abandoned mothers in Medallion.... *Sula*, I believe, thematizes some of the ambivalences about maternal discourse more broadly present in today's European and American feminist writing. It suggests that an acknowledgement of the specificity of maternal experience could offer a perspective crucial to feminism as an intellectual movement will be unable to account for important experiential differences among women."

Marianne Hirsch  
"Maternal Narratives: 'Cruel Enough to Stop the Blood'"  
*Critical Perspectives* (1993) 263-64, 270

"In this novel Morrison deliberately avoids the rhetorical/polemical features generally associated with socio-political Afro-American novels, or the 'protest fiction' exemplified in Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*. Morrison's acknowledgments of white American racism's circumscription of black life are neither trumpeted nor elaborated.... Morrison's glances at racism are presented with an almost delicate irony.... Morrison in *Sula* focuses less on conventionally defined 'protest' than on a depiction of the black experience....

Justifiably, Morrison has been praised for her 'comprehensive grasp of those black communal 'axioms' and rituals, for her powerful evocation of discrete black neighborhoods with the attendant 'spirit of place,' for her sensitivity to the real details—material and historical—forming the mental-emotional dialectic of the black experience.... On many levels, 'rebellious' is an apt descriptive for *Sula*.... This novel is one in which the relative social values of conservatism *and* iconoclasm are exquisitely balanced, and readers are hard put to determine 'where' the author's ultimate moral-thematic sympathies were directed. *Sula* emerges out of several literary and politico-cultural traditions—Modernist, Afro-American, and Feminist—but thematically and politically, it is *sui generis*, and thus an 'unpredictable' text....

'Rebel ideas' in *Sula* are manifold, beginning, of course, with Sula as a 'rebel,' a willing pariah. The black female outcast, here, however, is not a stereotyped Victim, in the mold of the pitiable Bessie in Wright's *Native Son* or the brutalized Mem in Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*.... On one hand, the black community, and by extension, the 'black experience,' is 'celebrated' and lovingly presented. At the same time, however... Seemingly of the Devil's party, Sula commands the fascination and perhaps even the respect (if not entire admiration) of the reader despite the fact that her social and familial behavior refutes most of the 'positive' black interpersonal values cited by sociologists researching the Afro-American social condition.... The Bottom 'community [in *Sula*]...was itself petty, hateful and spiteful.' Thus, in Morrison's world, the psychological 'security' and cultural homogeneity afforded by an enclosed black community may not be an absolute, definable positive value for each black individual consciousness. This idea is, in many senses, a radically 'feminist' consideration. But it is also a 'rebel idea,' an anti-traditional notion disputing the communalistic, socio-centric claims and 'verities' of much of African-American literature....

Both the textual 'evidence' and Morrison's own comments in interviews do little to dispel our sense of Sula as a moral and psychological enigma. The black community of the Bottom releases some of its uneasiness by classifying, and thus standardizing, her as 'evil'.... Sula resists our search for the conventional 'unified' sensibility or personality.... The novel's title character has no 'center,' no 'self,' no 'ego.' Sula fleetingly approaches a normative 'womanly' or 'wifely' behavior in her brief liaison with Ajax, during which she discovers a commonplace 'romantic' possessiveness—which, ironically, drives Ajax away. Her final scene with Nel and the depiction of her death, however, sustain our impression of her as an enigmatic and unregenerate rebel.... Feminist appropriations and interpretive distillations of *Sula* as solely a novel about 'black female friendship,' or as a 'black lesbian novel,' are too monistic....

Morrison's novel is a prime 'postmodernist' text; its interpretational difficulties are a function of Morrison's calculated indeterminacies....[pertinent information] deliberately left *out* of the text.... *Sula* in form and content is 'about' gaps, lacks, 'missing' subjects, and ambiguous psychic space, all of which must be 'filled' and interpreted by the reader; further, the narrative content and technique are complementary in their appreciation of how the devices of memory 'create' presence out of absence.... Morrison has commented on her technique: 'My writing expects, demands participatory reading.... It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it'....

The architecture of *Sula* particularly deserves comment. Morrison and others have described the format of *Sula* in terms of the 'circle' and 'spiral,' figures complementing the dramatic-thematic mirrorings and contrasts within the Nel-Sula relationship. The quasi-palindromic design of the novel is also notable; *Sula* divides precisely into two equal parts ('I' and 'II' contain almost exactly the same number of pages), and characters introduced and developed in 'I' are brought back in 'II' in inverse sequence. The novel begins 'in memory' and concludes with Nel's crucial remembrance of Sula. Part I ends with the marriage of Nel and Jude and the departure of Sula from Medallion in 1927; part 2 begins ten years later (1937) with Sula's return to Medallion and with the narrator's hint of Nel's marital stagnation. Most intriguingly, parts 1 and 2 and specifically Sula's departure and return, literally frame a blank narrative 'space' in the text. The actual center of the novel is perhaps the most noticeable of the novel's many gaps and discontinuities—in this case, the 'missing' decade in which Sula traveled extensively, went to college, and ostensibly challenged herself through experience....

On the one hand, Morrison has described Sula as a 'masculine' character, modeled admittedly upon the mobile and irresponsible black male 'type.' She is 'adventurous,' 'not scared,' and 'will leave and try anything.' Yet in the novel itself we do not 'see' or experience first hand Sula's exercising the options and opportunities that Morrison finds so appealing, the *mythoi* of 'questing' Joycean heroes, and in 'black literature about men:...the leaving home'... Instead, Sula's traveling and educational experiences away from the Bottom/Medallion are *relayed* to the reader and, importantly, to Nel. The empty space at the literal center of the novel thus may be seen as an emblem of the work's missing subject(s), discerned from two standpoints. From one vantage, the putative focus of the text is a 'sociopathic' enigma, a character who is not clearly, in the psychological and psychoanalytical sense of the term, a coherent or unified Subject. Beyond this *Sula*, as a novel is seemingly without a 'subject,' in that familiar sense in which the term is used....

Morrison's formal and characterizational avoidance of linearity and strict 'determinacy'...accounts for the beguiling gaps that 'dance' with and within the narrative's manifest content. In *Sula* there are 'missing' subjects (again, on several levels) and objects (e.g., Eva's leg and, later, her comb); absent persons are 'missed' (Chicken Little, Jude, Ajax, and Sula); and missing persons are evoked in the memory through objects (e.g., Nel associates Jude with his tie, Shadrack recalls Sula from her belt).... The mystery linking Eva's absence with her missing leg becomes an 'open' space for communal storytelling, for oral interpretation and re-creation within the Peace family and the community at large. Thus, indeterminacy becomes the site for fable-building.... Death, frequently violent, also asserts itself in the novel as a force of discontinuity....

Morrison's own statements regarding Sula seem inexact and impressionistic and represent perhaps not so much 'fuzziness' of design as an auctorial desire to inscribe a quality of pluri-signification upon her title character. Sula's chameleon effects and 'nature' are symbolically figured in the text by the prominent yet ambiguous discolored mark over her eye... Morrison consistently places the 'evil' which follows Sula after her arrival back in Medallion, accompanied by a 'plague of robins,' in the realm of societal judgment rather than metaphysical reality...to create in a character a type of pioneering self-centeredness.... And this strangeness in Sula, this curious detachment, is borne out most memorably and disturbingly when she 'watches' her mother burn to death, offering no aid, primarily because (as Eva senses) 'she was interested.' Even on her deathbed Sula makes a retrospective admission... 'I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing'.... [People lacking human sympathy are called sociopaths. Many become serial killers.]

In her rhetoric, sense of humor, earthiness, ironic intelligence, and willingness to take chances and make leaps, Sula seems superior to her constricting environment. Yet obviously, in some ways she needs the Bottom as much as the community needs and ‘feeds off’ her and her antics. Thus, Sula is not as autonomous existentially as she appears, and we note how Morrison takes pains to underline the fact that for all of her refreshing bravado she is an ‘unfinished’ woman, an entity who may not need a primary relationship but who does need *to be in a relationship* to something or someone.... Thus she fashions and sustains her unique identity as a ‘rebel’ only, and necessarily, in connection with the fairly orthodox and enclosed community of the Bottom....

The boundary shifts between Nel’s ‘goodness’ and Sula’s ‘evil’... Certainly Nel has been protected from self-knowledge by a factitious, socialized ‘innocence’ which allows her to categorize Sula as ‘bad’ even as she enjoys using Sula as scapegoat and ‘other.’ That she herself may be as ‘evil’ as Sula, and in fact more so because of her hypocrisy, strikes Nel at the conclusion, when she allows herself to understand the dark implications of her voyeuristic complicity in Chicken Little’s death.... Nel’s self-recognition here obviously mirrors Sula’s earlier admission of her pleasure in watching Hannah burn to death.”

Robert Grant  
“Absence into Presence:  
The Thematics of Memory and ‘Missing’ Subjects in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”  
*Critical Essays* (1993) 90-101

“*Sula* as well features a scapegoat-protagonist, although Sula clearly cultivates those qualities that distinguish her from her neighbors. Here, too, Morrison’s plot relies on a multiplicity of narratives to implicate Sula in the very community from which she is alienated. Although Sula, unlike Pecola, chooses her isolation, it is precisely that distance that destroys her. *Sula* centers on a character who believes that she can create for herself an identity that exists beyond community and social expectations. ‘An artist with no art form,’ Sula uses her life as her medium, ‘exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her.’ She thus defies social restraints with a vengeance.... Worst of all in her neighbors’ judgment, she discards men, black and white, as rapidly as she sleeps with them, even the husband of her best friend, Nel.

There are moments when the text seems to validate Sula’s way of life; the narrator suggests, for example, that Sula’s independence has bestowed upon her a kind of immortality.... But by interweaving Sula’s story with Shadrack’s and Nel’s, Morrison demonstrates structurally the collective nature of human identity. Sula’s story stands in analogous relation to Shadrack’s symbolic evidence that her situation, like Pecola’s is hardly unique. The communal response to Sula is identically Shadrack’s response to the unexpected. Shadrack, the insane World War I veteran whose story opens the novel, exemplifies in the extreme this need to explain or find a place for the inexplicable.... By creating National Suicide Day, he finds a way of controlling his fear.... The people of Medallion, Ohio, ridicule Shadrack’s holiday, but their survival, like his, depends upon finding ways of controlling their terrors. Superstitions, which recur in the narrative and in their collective discourse, help them explain disturbing disruptions....

Since they do not understand her, they call [Sula] evil and hold her responsible for the injuries and deaths that befall their community. As the narrator notes, the townspeople actually become more generous when they shun Sula because they assign to her their own baser impulses. For all her efforts to transcend the community, then, Sula remains an integral part of it. Morrison also undercuts Sula’s aspirations to originality by characterizing her as only half a person. As several critics have argued, Sula and Nel complement each other psychologically, and neither is fully herself after geography, and Sula’s relation to Jude, separate them.

Sula and Nel are products of two different styles of childrearing: their friendship grows out of their fascination with their dissimilarities. Sula’s family is the source of her independence of mind and sexual nonchalance. Her mother is known especially for her sexual generosity; her grandmother, Eva, for selling her leg to support her children.... Nel, on the other hand, is raised in a well-ordered but repressive household, and is thus prepared to choose a life of limited options such as the one she shares with Jude.



Haunted by the image of her own mother, a prostitute, Nel's mother tries to launder the 'funk' out of her daughter's life. During their childhood and adolescence, Nel provides Sula with restraints, and Sula offers Nel license....

Without Nel, 'the closest thing to both an other and a self,' Sula is cut off from the only relation that endowed her life with meaning, and she drifts to her death. Nel, too, is rendered incomplete when her friendship with Sula ends. She may think that her inescapable grief is the result of having lost her husband, but as she realizes at the end of the novel, what she had missed for so many years was not Jude, but Sula. The descendant of a line of relatively autonomous women, Sula attempts to go them one better and create herself outside of the collective assumptions of women's behavior. Morrison denies the feasibility of such a choice most obviously by killing off her protagonist."

Valerie Smith  
"Song of Solomon: Continuities of Community"  
*Critical Perspectives* (1993) 276-78

"When Hannah suffers a horrible death by fire, Sula is mesmerized by the sight of her mother 'dancing' in the flames and watches rather than running to her aid. Her recollection of that moment is a haunting revelation of her emotional paralysis.... Her inappropriate emotional response at the time suggests her distance from the ordinary feelings that bind family members in affection and loyalty. Her words also suggest another meaning: having misunderstood Hannah's overheard comment about loving but 'not liking' her daughter, Sula has since believed that she never *meant* anything to her own mother. Through such misunderstandings Sula becomes a kind of emotional orphan. Like Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, who lives out the meaning of her mother's rejection, Sula enacts her own interpretation of her mother's words, becoming a center of negative energy, withheld emotion, and absence of guilt.... She catalyzes the anxieties of those whose paths she crosses because (in others' eyes) she lives out the amoral potentialities that most people repress....

In *Sula*, three minor characters—homeless boys who come to live in the Peace household—are each called the same name, Dewey, by Eva. For the rest of their lives, they are an inseparable triad. Even their own mothers are unable to distinguish among them for, like figurative Siamese triplets whose physical boundaries are partially shared, each is joined 'with the other to become a trinity with a plural name...inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves.' Fused by Eva's naming of them, 'They spoke with one voice, thought with one mind. Like the "three deweys" (the capital letter is eventually dropped), incomprehensible [or absent] fathers,' approach a kind of psychological symbiosis.

In Morrison's narrative of unique female friendship, Sula and Nel initially discover their own essences and begin to grow through their reciprocal connection; each girl seems to have, both materially and metaphysically, what the other lacks. While Sula needs Nel as 'the closest thing to both another and a self,' Nel needs Sula to act out the denied dark forces in her own being. Sula, very much her mother's daughter, is sexually free, mercurial, amoral, and as bored by convention as Nel is wedded to it.... Nel's transfer of her symbiotic attachment from Sula to Jude severs the bond between the two girls that had supported both of them. From that point on, they are both partial people, each lacking emotionally what the other originally supplied. Nel participates in the orthodox rites of female maturation: marriage, maternity, childbirth, and—in the pattern typical of the relationships between men and women in the Bottom—abandonment by her husband, in this instance to the thrall of her best friend, Sula....

Sula loves the tidiness and material extravagance of Nel's house; Nel covets the disheveled atmosphere of Sula's, where there is more room for the unexpected. While Nel represents the orderly rationality of consciousness and repression, Sula embodies the darker, more mysterious and incongruous dimension of dreams and the unconscious. When the two girls are separated by Nel's marriage to Jude, Sula ultimately becomes split off from her own feelings. Her moral torpor sets her apart, not only from other people's codes, but also from meaningful connection to them, except through her body. Spiritual lassitude takes the form of promiscuity, for like her mother, Sula's only means of self-verification is her sexuality.... She flirts carelessly and without premeditation with Nel's man, Jude. Unconsciously, her act is a kind of punishment of Nel for betraying the bond that joined the two of them as girls. The single encounter between Sula and Jude eventually destroys Nel's marriage because it introduces dissatisfaction and forbidden desire where

satisfaction and complacency had previously reigned.... Sula herself is deceived by appearances. When she learns that the one man she can care for is not 'Ajax' but 'A. Jacks,' her illusions are destroyed: if he is not what she has thought him to be, then she cannot trust her own perceptions....

Sula never finds the other half of her equation again, although for a time she thinks that 'Ajax' might occupy that role. Just before her death, she imagines curling into the 'heavy softness' of water that might 'envelop her, carry her, and wash her tired flesh always.' The 'sleep of water' for which she longs is an image of merging into the embracing womb, the mother from whom she has felt radically separated. The image is also linked with preceding events, including Chicken Little's drowning at Sula's hands and the death of Plum, who wanted to crawl back into his mother's womb.... The symbolic return to the womb is expressed on the communal level in the tragic ending to the parade on the Bottom's last National Suicide Day. The people of the community led to the river's edge by Shadrack, release their rage and anger at the unfinished tunnel—in the construction of which they were barred from employment—by destroying the bricks and timbers at the excavation site. Entering the tunnel, a number of them find themselves in a suffocating 'chamber of water' created by the multiplied effect of their assault on the unstable structure in the warm mud. Like Chicken Little, they are swallowed by the river. Thus, Shadrack's vision of collective suicide is literally and tragically enacted.

In the serene detachment of her dying, Sula finds the only real peace of her life. Through Sula's death, however, her 'other self' achieves a kernel of knowledge. Almost twenty-five years later, Eva Peace makes Nel recognize her deeper resemblance to Sula. The doughty matriarch has always believed that the two girls were 'just alike...' Nel initially rejects this identification, for, ever since she chose marriage to Jude and conventional life, she has regarded herself as different from the wayward, amoral Sula. Eva's words force her to acknowledge that her passivity and silence when Chicken Little drowned were in fact complicity in the event—no different from Sula's detachment as her mother burned."

Roberta Rubenstein  
"Pariahs and Community"  
*Critical Perspectives* (1993) 132, 134-38

"In...*Sula* (1973), Morrison concentrates even more single-mindedly on women. From the self-estranged Shadrack, to the abandoning BoyBoy, Jude, and Ajax, the absent Mr. Wright, the incapacitated Plum, the futureless Chicken Little, to the interchangeable Deweys, Morrison seems systematically to inscribe the incapacity of African American masculinity, even as she writes men out of positions of importance in familial units and women's lives. This is truly a world without fathers. Eva's three-woman family becomes a model which Morrison will repeat in two subsequent novels, a female-headed household that manages without men. Although she is fascinated by this arrangement, Morrison in no way idealizes it. When her central character Sula rejects femininity as defined by heterosexuality, when she dreams of a life outside maternal identification, the novel sympathizes with her but clarifies that this rejection is not, in that context at least, either a viable or a successful choice."

Marianne Hirsch  
"Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"  
*New Essays on Toni Morrison*, ed. Valerie Smith  
(Cambridge U 1995) 72

"I myself am a transplanted white southerner.... Points where [students] identify with Morrison's work most often include descriptions of Nel and Sula's magical and sensual relationship, Morrison's descriptions of Sula as an artist with no medium of expression, and the convincing, rhapsodic presentation of the heterosexual relationship between Sula and Ajax and the equality between the two lovers. Points where the students feel like throwing the book across the room most often include Eva's burning of Plum, Nel's mother's cowering behavior on the train south, and Sula's casual sex with Nel's husband.... As a lesbian-feminist reader, [Barbara] Smith responds to Morrison's portrayal of the intense connection between the two little girls... Smith calls the relationship lesbian, even though Morrison has denied having such an intention when she wrote the story....

I am struck by [students'] biased judgment of behavior in cultures whose ethical boundaries vary from those of their own. They are often skeptical or mildly moralistic about Eva's heroic sacrifice of her leg,

vaguely repulsed by the lard scene, flatly disapproving of Mrs. Wright for not standing up to train officials, censorious of Hannah for ruining her daughter's life, and shocked beyond all romanticism at the thought of a mother's burning her own son... Referring to *Beloved* and Sethe's central act of saving her child from a return to slavery by slitting the child's throat jars students out of their ethnocentric thinking so that they may more intelligently judge Morrison's mothers.... Many white feminists, my students included, find it much easier to decry our oppression as women than to acknowledge our role in oppressing others.... My students do not easily admit an active part in the systematic discrimination against African Americans by virtually every American institution."

Toni A. H. McNaron  
"‘Raked with Wonder’: A White Instructor Teaches *Sula*"  
*Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison*  
eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle  
(MLA 1997) 35-38

"Undergraduates often voice concern about how even to begin making sense of *Sula*.... This beautiful and original novel can be approached in several ways, but one particularly useful tack is to ask students to study it as if it were a poem. *Sula* is as finely crafted as a sonnet.... Instead of using strict chronological plot to link events, Morrison relies on figurative language and symbolic patterns to structure and give form to *Sula*.... In large part, the novel is about the life and death of this African American community, the Bottom.... Ultimately, urban ‘progress’ and ‘renewal’ destroy this neighborhood..."

Also, people who leave the Bottom lose touch with their nurturing roots and are damaged by the competitive, profit-seeking urban world. One of *Sula*'s main themes, then, is the importance of maintaining links to one's heritage and community. Morrison conveys this idea by using imagery to show conflicts between the Bottom's simple, nurturing life and outside commercial forces of ‘progress.’ Among the most important symbolic patterns in *Sula* are those dealing with settings (the rural Bottom vs. the urban outside world), food imagery (nutritious, natural fruits and vegetables linked to the Bottom vs. city-produced, commercially prepared, sweet junk food), and aural images (comforting voices of community vs. the silence of isolation)....

Some of Morrison's characters, such as Eva and Nel, mistakenly believe it is desirable and possible to eradicate disorder, and so they attempt to control life and its mutability in unhealthy ways. Others, such as Sula, make the opposite error, rejecting all order, even that which one must accept to be part of a community. In other novels Morrison describes characters such as Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye* who balance form and chaos and live creative, productive lives. In *Sula*, however, no character is able to do so.... Shad's ordeals foreshadow many of Sula's dilemmas, and thus one answer to the question of why Sula appears late in the novel is that Morrison prepares for Sula's introduction by delineating other characters' experiences....

Away from the Bottom, Shad's life is shattered. As a soldier in France during World War I, Shadrack sees a comrade's head severed in battle... This scene of complete disorder devastates Shad, and he is hospitalized, disoriented and unable to control his hands to feed himself.... The result is National Suicide Day, an event whose creation is an attempt to contain death's disorder... Sula and Shad think they have understood each other, but they have not.... In describing Shad, Morrison establishes most of the imagery patterns with which she structures *Sula*. Shadrack leaves the Bottom and suffers irreparable harm in the outside, business-motivated, urban world.... The unhealthy, urban-produced sweets suggest the lure, the temptations, of the damaging outside world....

Usually, the class concludes that Eva did place her leg under the train to collect insurance money. She exchanged something living, her limb, for money, something she could control or could use to control her life. But Eva kills Plum because she cannot stand the disorder his drug addiction occasions. She cannot abide the change, the diminishing, that war has brought to his personality. Shad tries to contain life and death with Suicide Day; similarly, Eva believes she can control chaos by taking life and death into her hands. Students usually agree unanimously that Eva is not justified in killing Plum.... Eva's self-mutilation as she sacrifices her leg and murders her own flesh, Plum, are acts of desperation similar to Sula's. However, in attempts to control disorder—the Irish boys' threat, children's hunger, Plum's...addiction--

Sula and Eva cause more chaos by trying to impose order in an inappropriate manner.... [Sula] turns Eva out of her own home and warehouses her in the nursing home, seduces Nel's husband, and sleeps willingly with white men....

Morrison is an inspired name giver, and she links Shad, Plum, and Sula by giving each the name of a food. Sula is a genus of gannets, goose-like, edible seabirds. Similarly, shad is a fish and plum is a fruit. However, the characters' nurturing qualities, suggested by their names, are damaged by their experiences in the urban world. Like the blackberries that are mutilated to accommodate the Medallion Golf Course, Sula, Shad, and Plum are harmed by losing contact with their community....

Morrison makes clear that the answer is not unequivocally that Nel is good and Sula bad. Rather, she hints that the two women are in some ways two halves of a whole; both err in becoming extremes rather than balancing order and disorder in their lives.... Sula has no order in her life; the woman has 'no center, no speck around which to grow'... Thus Sula flouts society to the point that the community will not help bury her after she dies. Even while making love, Sula experiences no real connection with another human: 'There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning.' An 'artist' with no art form, Sula is unable to create a meaningful life for herself. Beginning with the notion that the Bottom is actually high in the hills surrounding the town of Medallion, Morrison uses irony throughout *Sula*. And one of the chief ironies is that as the town's pariah Sula stimulates good behavior in other people."

Elizabeth B. House  
"Sula: Imagery, Figurative Language, and Symbols"  
*Approaches* (MLA 1997) 99-104

"Morrison connects her attempt to interact with the reader to an African worldview she and other African Americans have inherited.... The acceptance of both the natural and supernatural is part of an African worldview, often dismissed by Western rationalists.... The African presence in Morrison's novels has been characterized by the more general literary term *magic realism*. In Morrison's work this alternative reality is connected to an African worldview. Some African critics have balked at the notion of an African worldview since Africa has many cultures and traditions.... However, this concept certainly has validity in relation to African American history because of the intermingling of cultures from west and central Africa during the slave trade.... Although *Song of Solomon* is possibly the novel in which Morrison best incorporates African elements, this worldview is evident in *Sula* as well.... In addition to incorporating the supernatural into the novel, Morrison disrupts our sense of linear time and numerical order, which are among the basic tenets of scientific thought.... In the chapter '1923,' when strange things begin happening in the Bottom, the opening sentence of the chapter dislodges our sense of structure, because we learn of the 'second strange thing' before we have any idea of what the first is....

The community, which collectively functions as a character (harkening to the choral presence in much African drama), accepts Shadrack: 'They knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn't have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power'... In *Sula* a main character who exhibits [the power of "discredited" knowledge of the supernatural] is Eva, Sula's grandmother. In some ways she is an earlier version of the Africanized Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, living in a three-generation women's household that resists assimilation. There is an extended family of a sort, and Eva is the matriarch who keeps things together in opposition to racism and poverty. Like Ajax's mother, she is a conjure woman; she saves her children through the mysterious loss of a leg and learns about what she has not heard or witnessed (like the death of Chicken Little) through conversations with her dead son, Plum. Although Eva is a more controversial character than the loving Pilate, she reflects a West African model of a woman who is resourceful and who is a citizen in her own right....

No worldview condones the killing of one's child, but students can better understand this distortion of mother love when it is put in the historical context of slave mothers who committed infanticide rather than have their children live a life of slavery (a subject Morrison further develops in *Beloved*). And because we accept that Plum explains things to Eva from beyond the grave, we may assume that he too has forgiven her. Sula, although confrontational and suspicious toward her grandmother, retains many of Eva's characteristics. Like Eva, Sula is a powerful woman, connected to an alternative reality. Like the story of

Eva's leg, Sula's birthmark engenders all kinds of community mythologies.... We can further read Jude's envisioning of Sula's birthmark as a copperhead as representative of their future betrayal of Nel....

[The] African concept of the interrelatedness of ostensible opposites, prefiguring poststructuralist theory, helps us decipher the intricate and complicated relationship between Sula and Nel and begins to make comprehensible Sula's presumed betrayal of her best friend. Like families in other Morrison novels, Nel's family leads a middle-class existence of conventionality and assimilation, while Sula's family is a loosely constructed African American revisioning of African extended family organization.... The scene in which Nel walks in on Sula and Jude on all fours is singularly distressing to readers. The way the novel is constructed, Sula's betrayal of Nel seems much greater than Jude's. For students, who often identify with Sula because of her nonconformity and independence, it is a shock. We find it hard to forgive Sula this transgression.... I raise a point only hinted at in the novel, that in a polygamous household, still prevalent in many African societies, Sula and Nel might have been able to share Jude amicably.... African-based societies often emphasize consanguinal relations over conjugal....

The community flounders as National Suicide Day becomes a sort of mass suicide, based both in anger at the unfairness of the system and in the rejection of the ancestors whose role it is to protect the community. Sula, despite her power, has no ancestor to guide her (Eva, finally, is no Pilate), and Shadrack, shattered by Sula's death, is unable by the end of the novel to tap into the ancestral presence. Ironically, only the most assimilated (like Mrs. Wright) and those who, through their connection to the ancestors, 'understood the Spirit's touch,' were saved from the tragedy in the tunnel they were forbidden to build and tried to kill."

Gay Wilentz  
"An African-Based Reading of *Sula*"  
*Approaches* (1997) 127-33

"In *Sula*, people in the Bottom amass an identity of evil called Sula that functions somewhat like the 'background' of racism Morrison identifies in white American literature. But the need for such a ground, and its effects, is different. One might say there is a projection of evil within the black community useful to withstanding the projections practiced upon the community by whites. Under pressure from external forces of racism, people in the Bottom distribute their moral variations among themselves in order to contain what they could project into the white population only at the risk of their own lives. What they contain is not only the evil that would more accurately be located outside their community but their own rage, which, because limitless, cannot be stopped once let loose."

Patricia McKee  
"Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison's *Sula*"  
*Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*  
ed. Nancy J. Peterson  
(Johns Hopkins 1997) 59

"*Sula* generated more negative and positive critical responses than *The Bluest Eye*. In this story, the focus is on the inversion of conventional systems of thought and values through oppositions between self and other, good and evil, social approbation and community rejection. The novel posits a binary structure centered in the relationship between two black female friends with opposite upbringings and behavior patterns, Sula and Nel, and follows them from childhood through their adult years. As an alternate selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, *Sula* brought Morrison to larger public attention. As with *The Bluest Eye*, critics unanimously approved her literary skills, but some expressed impatience with her insistence (as they read it) on working on the small canvas of the lives of black girls and women instead of on larger subjects in American life."

Nellie Y. McKay, Introduction  
*Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*  
eds. McKay and William L. Andrews  
(Oxford 1999) 5-6

"In *Sula*, she begins the transformation of woman from human being to something other than human. The people in the Bottom make Sula into a witch whom they believe to be in league with the forces of evil

if not with the devil himself. They believe that she makes Teapot fall off her steps, that she causes Mr. Finley's death when he chokes on a chicken bone, and that she is a witch who can make herself appear much younger than she is. Her suprahuman qualities lead them to ostracize her to the point of circumventing the rituals that usually apply to death and funerals in black communities. Sula's demise, however, points to another source for comparison with *Beloved*. Sula's sentience beyond death, presented briefly in the book, is enough to signal that Morrison has drawn no final lines between the planes of life and death."

Trudier Harris  
"Beloved: Woman, Thy Name is Demon"  
*Casebook* (1999) 129-30

"The titular character decides to take on the entire establishment, but especially the world of insufficient males. She breaks from community and destroys herself, if we read her death from cancer as a metaphor for her struggle against male privilege. But Morrison is hardly through. She is inventive, imaginative, fabulous in unforeseen ways. She mixes her metaphors and gains new ground.

Shadrack comes out of active duty in World War I a blasted individual, full of hallucinations, wretched, incapable of cohering in any of his functions, wreckage, and, as he suspects, garbage to be disposed of. He must be straitjacketed, but despite his violence, he was discharged from the hospital, which needed space. He is, of course, a human time bomb. Hardly able even to walk, no less function, he is now a free man, with a going-away gift from the government of two hundred and seventeen dollars and a suit of clothes. In some respects, Shadrack is a black version of Virginia Woolf's Septimus Smith, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, another castaway from the war, incapable of functioning and yet thrust into a society he can never enter.

Shadrack's mental instability focuses on his hands, which seem to him a monstrosity, especially since he had expected to lose them in battle. But he also harbors feelings of unreality, of lacking existence; and his vision, when he has one, is of blackness. Yet, in some way, blackness fits his mood—it allows him to let go of all social restraints, to bathe himself in nothingness. He has fear which is uncontrollable, and while he is not deemed dangerous to others, he lives at a different level. How can he control himself? How can he allay some of the fear? As a solution, he founds National Suicide Day, an annual event on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, a celebration of death when he can play out all he fears, those actual as well as those unexpected. For the rest of the year, he is able to hang on, because he knows that on one day he can let it all go and contemplate the worst.

In 1920, the Day starts. The townspeople are obviously fearful. They fear Shadrack, whose appearance is wild, primitive, even barbaric; and they fear the day as a celebration of death. But as the years pass, the townspeople see that Shadrack is contained within his own mad boundaries, and in time the Day is accepted, as a holiday like Christmas or Easter, or a birthday. In one respect, Shadrack is reborn on National Suicide Day, and the town of Medallion, Ohio, is reconciled.

With this, Morrison has a great symbolic or metaphorical presence. In this, her second novel, she has caught her vision: a local event with national implications; a personal aberration which becomes acceptable as a community ritual; the presence of a madman who in some way proves a visionary; a celebratory or ritualistic event which serves to create coherence, to underscore a community; the creation of a person who lives 'outside' and yet a figure who observes, who becomes the repository of the community's deepest secrets—in this case Sula's and Nel's responsibility for Chicken Little's drowning death; and, not least, the presentation of an individual who while bringing together terrible matters transforms them into something sacred, and instead of dividing the community somehow manages to unify it. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate Dead serves that function: hiding her madness under a socially accommodating style, but mad she is, in Morrison's best sense....

National Suicide Day has resonance for race and racial matters, which Morrison increasingly takes up in her 1980s and 90s fiction. *Beloved*, with its metaphor of 'the secret,' is the culmination of that concern. The Day resonates obviously in racial matters, in matters of national madness (in which all of Meridian acquiesces in the needs of a war-doomed man), but also as part of the gender war, in which women bend to men who try to destroy them and yet resist sufficiently to destroy their men. Implicit in National Suicide

Day is Morrison's theme of the sacrifice of a child to the needs of a parent or of a pre-condition: Eva and her son in *Sula*; the situation in *Beloved*, whereby a mother kills her baby rather than let her become a slave; and in several other places where a child's life is aborted. National Suicide Day clearly acts as a kind of filter for Morrison's vision, her sense of what avails... It is both her anvil on which she can periodically bang and her fallback when she must retreat from untenable or irresolvable situations."

Frederick R. Karl  
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Michael Hollister (2014)