

Bloom's Literature

How to Write about *Sula*

Reading to Write

Toni Morrison's novels are well known for being complex and challenging pieces of fiction that can be interpreted in a range of ways. Keep this in mind as you read *Sula* and think about your essay topic. One of the ways *Sula* challenges the reader is by the ambiguous nature of characters' actions and life choices. Why does Morrison seemingly leave the reader with the responsibility for deciding whether certain actions are morally correct? In what ways does she present us with a character's decision without judging the behavior? Examining what motivates characters can lead to many interesting discussions in an essay about the town of Medallion, its inhabitants, and the historical time period.

Close reading of a section of the novel can help you to identify an angle to take in your essay. We will now closely analyze the heated emotional exchange between Eva and her daughter Hannah, to begin to discover a choice of topics to write about. The conversation provides one of the moments in the book when characters are forced to consider their actions and have to provide an explanation for their behavior:

"Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just 'cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies.... With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off ... what you talkin' bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what ... ?"...

"But what about Plum? What'd you kill Plum for, Mamma?"...

"I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man and not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (72).

The dialogue allows us to uncover the sense of abandonment that Hannah feels; we can also appraise Eva's morally ambiguous justification for killing her own son Ralph, known as Plum. As readers we catch a glimpse of the rationale behind the act of mercy killing that Eva engages in when she sets her son alight. We are left to evaluate her actions for ourselves, which could lead to an interesting exploration in an essay on parental responsibilities and ethical behavior.

The metaphor that Eva uses to describe Plum's drug-addled state is extremely powerful. She compares him to a baby who wants to return to the womb. His unnatural desire is compounded by her repetition that he is a "big old growed-up man," thus allowing us to internalize the fact that he is a person beyond help, who cannot be roused out of his permanent child-like state which is brought on by his extreme drug addiction. How is the reader affected by Morrison's use of vivid imagery ("scrunched up inside my womb"), figurative language (the personification of Tuberculosis), African-American vernacular ("Wasn't nobody playin'"), and references to social inequalities and poverty ("Niggers was dying like flies")? When writing your papers, including these considerations can greatly enhance your analysis.

In the conversation between Eva and Hannah, Morrison presents us with bizarre events in her characters' lives in a way that is plausible to the audience. This is typical of Morrison's work, and essential in great fiction—the crafting of peculiar events in a way that the audience can relate to and actually believe. These odd events can be explored further as you begin to write, and can provide many ideas for essays. In your essays you may want to ponder the questions: How does Morrison get the reader to suspend disbelief? How are we so effectively drawn into her fictional world? Some other examples of the bizarre in the novel that can be written about are the three boys whom Eva names Dewey who remain 48 inches tall, the mystery of Eva's missing leg, the plague of robins that announce Sula's return to the Bottom after her 10-year absence, the death of Chicken Little, and the ball of fur that accompanies Nel after her husband betrays her. Is the world Morrison creates unbelievable, or do stranger events occur in the real world? An in-depth analysis of *Sula's* multi-layered narrative can produce thought-provoking essays and discussions; the following section will offer some specific suggestions for essay topics.

Topics and Strategies

Here you will find a variety of topics to consider. It is up to you to interpret the events and characters in the novel in an original way. Doing your own research can help you to put some of the occurrences in the novel into historical context, and can also help you to identify a unique angle to the novel to address in your paper.

Themes

The themes in the novel are numerous and could lead to thought-provoking papers. An obvious choice is friendship, but looking further into the novel may help you to avoid writing on a theme that has been excessively analyzed. Contemplate recurring ideas running through the narrative that strike your curiosity. Beauty, individualism, war, peace, morality—these are some themes that can be fleshed out to generate a remarkable essay. An exploration of peace, for example, could lead you on a literary journey that considers the irony of the family name Peace, characters' futile search for a sense of peace, and the apparent peacefulness (or monotony) of life in Medallion before Sula's return. Find the places in the book that wrestle with the issue, and note characters' reactions to the issue or the way it is manifested in the story. You may ask yourself what Morrison is doing by revisiting this idea throughout the novel—is she commenting on societal norms? Is she using a character to reject these norms or expectations? Themes often overlap with philosophical ideas, so do not limit yourself to writing about one word that you imagine represents the whole book, like beauty. Stretch yourself to consider other possibilities such as the role of racism and internalized racism in people's perceptions of beauty.

Sample Topics:

1. **Individualism:** How do people who are staunchly individualistic (for whatever reason) fare in the novel? Is it possible to break away from the tediousness of the collective and to be one's own person?

There are many characters to write about who live solitary lives, in spite of the collective pressure from the community members of Medallion. Sula is resolutely individualist and claims she does not need the community for her survival. In contrast, her grandmother Eva survives because of gifts of food from community members. Sula abhors the notion of slipping into anonymity, like the rest of the community, whereas Nel cannot imagine not belonging to the collective. Other characters to consider for an essay on individualism: Shadrack, Helene Wright's mother, Tar Baby, Plum.

2. **Violence:** What role does violence play in the lives of the inhabitants of Medallion? Are the violent deaths extreme or realistic?

Almost every character in the novel has some sort of brush with violence, so there is plenty to write about for an essay on this topic. You also need to keep in mind the complexities of the violence to avoid creating a laundry list of violent acts in your paper; simply listing violent occurrences is not analyzing, which is what you want to do when writing. Look at the range of emotions involved in various violent acts or thoughts: Nel remembers that she feels joy at Chicken Little's disappearance in the river, Sula tells her grandmother to be cautious because she may set her on fire when least expected, Shadrack watches as the people on his National Suicide Day parade succumb to the icy depths of the river and drown.

3. **Love:** In what ways is the love in the novel a salve for the many horrific occurrences? How is the love not enough to appease the characters in light of their extreme suffering?

As with writing about violence, do not neglect the range of emotions involved in the different kinds of love present in the book: Eva's endowment to her daughters was the gift of loving men, Jude wants to marry to make him whole, whereas years later Nel's love for Jude had not made her a better person, but "had spun a steady web around her heart" (95). Try not to simplify this topic, since it is one that can initially be appealing to write about because it may seem an easy subject to tackle. You can maintain the complexity if you reflect on the less obvious examples of love, and try to discover people's motivations. Interpreting ironic statements about love might be a place to begin for an essay. What can you say about the way Ajax proclaims "[A]ll [women] want ... is they own misery.... Ax em to die for you and they yours for life" (83)?

Character

At first glance, Shadrack, Sula, and Nel appear to be the main characters of the book. Some critics claim that the people of Medallion are also a main character, and that they make up a collective protagonist. Approaching the novel in this way in an essay

might be appealing. How do Medallion's townsfolk collectively become a character? Do they all think alike? Who lies on the outskirts of the unit, and why? Returning to the themes in the novel will help you when drafting your ideas on character. You can ask yourself why certain characters feel the need to distance themselves from the group and how societal norms such as racism, classism, and sexism unite some characters or stifle others.

Sample Topics:

1. **Nel Wright's character:** Discuss the following quotations in an essay: when Nel proclaims, "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel" (28) and the narrator's observation about Nel that "[h]er parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had" (83). What role do parents have in shaping their children? Is it possible to distance oneself from high parental expectations?

Analysis of carefully chosen quotations can produce remarkable essays. For this essay you could show that Nel has exhibited some rebellious characteristics, but is still a conformist. Her rebellious nature allows her to understand Sula's shortcomings without going as far as the rest of the community by labeling her as evil. You could research the effects of parental pressure on children and incorporate those facts into your discussion.

2. **Sula Mae Peace's character:** How does Sula conflict with the inhabitants of Medallion while asserting herself as a unique individual?

For your essay, think of the situation when Sula tells her grandmother that she wants to create herself. How does she accomplish this feat of self-creation? What is the effect on Sula when she hears her mother say she loves her, but does not like her? Is it ironic that Sula "helped others define themselves" (95)? Since "[t]hey believed that she was laughing at their God" (115), she certainly helps the town define evil. Why is her "indifference to established habits of behavior" (127) a reason for the town to hold her in such disregard?

3. **Shadrack's character:** What does Shadrack's character teach us about the after effects of war and the ways mentally ill people can be ostracized from a community?

Morrison's portrayal of Shadrack's post-traumatic stress disorder after his experiences in World War I is a most touching account of the struggle to retain equilibrium after the shocking events of war. Your essay could encompass his difficult struggle to maintain a sense of stability and to keep loneliness and dejection at bay; you could also address how successful he is at creating stability and fending off loneliness. How does he regain a sense of normalcy in spite of being viewed as a vagrant in Medallion? Why do people join him finally in his National Suicide Day march in 1942?

History and Context

In the 1970s many African-American authors faced extreme pressure from society to write about the stereotypical African-American experience, which was often interpreted as the effects of racism on the black community. Because the country was reeling from the aftermath of brutal racism which led to the Civil Rights Movement, people expected artists and writers to address these issues in their work. Morrison talks about these demands in the foreword of *Sula*. Never one to conform to external pressure, Morrison addressed the black experience in a unique way, focusing instead on women's relationships and dysfunctional family connections. Writing about the historical context that produced *Sula* can take you in many directions, to the racial injustice that Ajax refers to as "the natural hazards of Negro life" (133), the influence Christianity has on the black community, and the treatment of black women who society claims, "[c]an't have it all" (142).

Sample Topics:

1. **World War I:** War is the backdrop for many works of fiction. How do the events of World War I frame the novel and lead us into the often violent world in Medallion? Is *Sula* an anti-war novel?

This essay could use Shadrack's experiences to present a clear argument on whether or not you think the novel actually portrays war in such a way as to make a stance against it. In what ways does Shadrack survive the war physically, but not emotionally? How successful is he at making a safe haven for himself? You could look into the treatment that veterans faced after the war and compare Morrison's portrayal of Shadrack to historical accounts.

2. **Racism in America:** How do some of the characters in the novel experience racism?

There are blatant forms of racism in Sula's world, but Morrison also presents the subtleties and complexities of racism that can be missed with a cursory look at the book. The blatant examples that you could write further on are the Sheriff's shocking comment to the bargeman who finds Chicken Little to throw the body back into the river, the difficulties the Medallion men have in securing work, and the townspeople's rage which leads to several of them drowning in the tunnel on National Suicide Day in 1942. A subtle or complex example might be the way Nel's mother Helene Wright makes her pull her nose so that she can "have a nice nose" (55) and be beautiful. In an essay you could explore the role that societal racism plays in Helene's internalized racism.

3. **The role of Christianity in African-American fiction:** Explore the functional role of Christianity and the spirit world in the novel. Why do Medallion's inhabitants have a "simple determination not to let anything ... keep them from their God" (150)?

Addressing such a broad topic as Christianity in the novel is quite an undertaking. You could write a lengthy research paper on the topic, or limit yourself to a few examples of the power of Christianity in the lives of Medallion's inhabitants. Exploring the way Christianity placates people from the harsh reality of racism or the brutal events in life, such as Chicken Little's inexplicable death or Hannah's tragic death, might be an interesting focus. What other kinds of spiritual strengths do people draw on? Why are the townsfolk so determined to label Sula as evil?

Philosophy and Ideas

Much of Sula's conversation consists of philosophical musings about human nature, responsibilities to the community, gender expectations, and moral dilemmas. In your essay, an examination of Sula's beliefs and other characters and their philosophies might uncover varied approaches to living (and dying). Why does Morrison use characters such as Ajax, Shadrack, and Helen Wright to represent the world of Medallion? Is there any juxtaposition of philosophies that allow us to examine our own beliefs and worldviews?

Sample Topics:

1. **Alienation caused by abandonment:** In what ways are many characters in the novel alienated from the collective? How do they cope with their loneliness, their preoccupation, and other after effects of feeling abandoned?

Sula's profound loneliness would make for a compelling essay. What is ironic about her loneliness, given that she is bored so easily by others and refuses to conform, even if she will have no friends? How do the people of Medallion manage to maintain a sense of hope in the face of racism and abandonment by society at large? Answering these questions will lead you to a synthesis of the numerous personal struggles that people have in the novel when feeling abandoned.

2. **Ethical behavior:** The townsfolk of Medallion are shocked and disturbed when Sula puts her grandmother, Eva, in a nursing home. Find other examples of dishonorable behavior, include who defines the behavior as unethical, and explore people's responses to it.

There are many examples of unethical behavior in the novel. What do you make of the fact that Sula watches her mother burn to death with interest? What about the silence that Nel and Sula uphold after Sula drops Chicken Little in the river and he drowns? Are the community members morally responsible for remaining silent about Tar Baby's excessive alcoholism? These and other questions could be argued in a fascinating paper on ethics in *Sula*.

3. **The search for self-knowledge:** How does Shadrack's journey of self-discovery evolve after his tragic experiences in World War I? Discuss the journey of self-discovery for three other characters in the book.

In an essay about Shadrack, we could view him as a symbol of the struggle that Medallion's community faces. He is the gaping wound that people in the community think they are immune from, but which they also suffer greatly from. What journeys do other characters embark on in their quest for self-knowledge (or their desire to remain in denial)?

Language, Symbols, and Imagery

Morrison's novels are well known for their dazzling images and lyrical qualities. *Sula* is no exception, and an essay built around the well-crafted poetics of people's conversations would make for fascinating reading. It is easy for an essay on figurative language to

deteriorate into a list of symbols and metaphors. One way to avoid this pitfall is to ask what the symbols and metaphors mean in the larger context of the book. You can uncover, for example the meaning of the grey ball of fluff that Nel sees and that eventually dissipates when she realizes it represents her sorrow over losing her soul mate Sula. So rather than simply pointing out a figure of speech or a clever play on words, relate it to a character or to the historical or social context.

Sample Topics:

1. **Figurative language: metaphors/similes/personification/symbols:** The figurative language prevalent in *Sula* adds a dimension to the prose that can absorb a reader in the sheer beauty of the language. How does the language complement the fantastical elements in the novel?

Look for powerful similes such as the one used to describe Eva's determination to ironically "save" Plum by killing him, when she goes "swooping like a giant heron" down the stairs (46). You could also discuss how many bizarre events are foreshadowed and described: for example, Eva "didn't willingly set foot on the stairs but once and that was to light a fire, the smoke of which was in her hair for years" (37).

2. **Imagery:** Vivid images enable readers to enter into the world that is created by the author. How do the images allow us to interpret the events that occur in *Medallion*?

You may want to turn to the haunting images of various tragedies, such as Chicken Little's disappearance into the river, Eva's flight out of the window to extinguish the flames that are engulfing her daughter Hannah, and Sula and Jude engaged in the sex act. You could contrast these with calming images, such as the butterflies Ajax releases into Sula's house, and the deweys' beautiful teeth. Show how the images help to create the reader's idea of the town.

3. **African-American vernacular and naming:** How do the language in the text and the unusual names of people and places give us a rich sense of African-American culture?

Research into African-American vernacular could enhance your essay, or you could just limit yourself to the novel's rich examples of language. The ironic names could be a beginning point for an essay: you could examine the Peace family, who are far from experiencing tranquility, Tar Baby who is supposedly white and is named by a devious Eva, the Bottom, which paradoxically becomes coveted land that the whites end up moving into in the hills, and Ajax, who is named after a Greek god who was a hero in the Trojan war, but is stripped of his greatness when Sula finds out his name is Albert Jacks.

Compare and Contrast Essays

The book presents us with stark contrasts—contrasts that would make for a fascinating essay if explored in earnest. The pitfall to avoid is reducing your essay into a simplistic list of similarities and differences. You can avoid this mistake if you keep your focus on the complexities of certain relationships between opposite individuals or opposing forces. Try to find subtle pairs to compare and contrast, like the deweys and Tar Baby—first identify what they could possibly have as a basis of comparison. Both are abandoned, ridiculed, or simply ignored by society. Both appear mysteriously, without any true sense of self or of their heritage. They are also both objects of ridicule in a sense (with their strange names for starters), but are admired for uncanny traits—the deweys for their beautiful teeth, Tar Baby for his beautiful singing voice. After identifying similarities or differences, examine the characters' roles in the novel and what they represent to the Bottom's residents.

Sample Topics:

1. **Tar Baby versus Shadrack:** How do Tar Baby and Shadrack cope with their social ostracism?

These two lone figures may not appear to have any similarities. That is the beauty of *Sula*—the many subtle and unexpected connections between characters. Your essay could focus on who is more successful at survival. Although Tar Baby seems to be more a part of the community—engaging in social activities such as singing in the choir—he may be more of a tragic figure than Shadrack. Whose life is more meaningful in the community's eyes?

2. **Nel Wright and her mother, Helene, in contrast to Sula Mae Peace and her mother, Hannah:** Contrast Nel's relationship to her mother and Sula's interaction with her mother.

You could look at the ways both mothers introduce their daughters into a world of self-love or self-hatred, their attitudes

toward sex, their expectations of them as women, and how these relationships affect them as adults. How do their relationships with their mothers influence their relationships with men and each other? How does Nel contend with her mother's over-protective molly-coddling, and how does Sula react to her mother's quiet disdain?

3. **Sula Mae Peace versus Nel Wright:** Nel and Sula's relationship is mystical and passionate: they met "in the delirium of their noon dreams" (51) and are described as inhabiting one body and mind. How do they converge and diverge as soul mates and friends?

There are many ways to contrast these two major characters. You could contrast their physical attributes: Sula's birthmark is described as a rose, a frightful black mark, a snake over her eye, a tadpole, and Hannah's ashes, depending on the spectator. Nel's looks are seldom mentioned apart from in contrast to her mother, who is glad she is not a beauty. But in an essay you need to go further than just identifying physical differences. How do these differences play a role in others' perceptions of them? Why does Nel allow her parents to strip her of any internal spark, whereas Sula argues with her grandmother that she'll "split this town in two ... before I'll let you put it out" (93)?

4. **Compare imperfection in *Sula* and *Beloved*:** How does imperfection, physical or otherwise, play a role in characters' lives in these two novels?

Physical imperfection is a theme that can be found throughout Morrison's work, so you need not restrict yourself to these two novels. *Sula* and *Beloved* provide an interesting starting point because the examples of physical imperfections are so obvious—Sethe's scarred back and Eva's missing leg, for example. You might want to begin with various characters' self-image or understanding of their difference and examine whether they feel an emotional or physical loss. In *Sula*, Eva Peace returns to Medallion with only one leg but refuses to tell the curious townspeople what happened. Her strength and physical abilities are not diminished, and culminate in her heroic acts to save her son and daughter from physical and emotional death. In *Beloved* many characters feel emotional imperfection, or sense that something is missing in their lives. How does the physical or emotional disability play a role in character development, or the way the characters assess themselves?

Further Information

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