



Sula, by Toni Morrison (1973) Argument-Based Questions

These argument-based questions on Toni Morrison’s *Sula* can be used in a variety of ways in class to help students to analyze the text in relation to the debatable interpretive questions established at the beginning of the unit. One way is to conduct small group discussions on the questions after the class completes chapter-clusters, conducting small group discussions five times in the unit. The groups should be asked to share out their responses with each other. There is an opportunity here to look for differing, clashing interpretive responses to the stories.

Another way to use these questions, using them at the end of the unit, is to jigsaw with them. The class should be divided into five groups, with each group assigned a chapter-cluster. The groups should discuss each question, with each student offering their view, supported by reference to the text. The group members should try to come to a consensus around their best collective response to each question. Each student should write out the group’s collective response so that they can bring it to newly formulated jigsaw groups. These groups should have one representative from each of the five groups. Each student in the jigsaw groups should present their responses to each of their questions, beginning each one by reading the question aloud. After each response, students have an opportunity to disagree with the response or add something significant to it.

“Part One [Introduction], “1919,” & “1920”

1. In what ways does Toni Morrison’s introduction to Part One subtly establish that racism permeates the small-town Ohio setting of the novel?
2. Morrison places a stunning image right at the outset of “1919” (the year, of course, after the end of world War I): “But stubbornly, taking no direction from the 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” (8). This of

course is a memory Shadrack has from his experience on the battlefield of “the Great War.” How does Shadrack (whose very name echoes “shell-shock”) process his wartime experience? Do we as readers sympathize with him and his creation of National Suicide Day, or do we derogate him? How about the other members of Medallion?

3. In describing Helene and Nel’s relationship, in “1920” the narrator says, “Under Helene’s hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were clamed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground” (18). How does the character Helene seem to operate in relation to the debatable question on the novel’s thematic handling of motherhood? Is she a traditional, conservative foil to the novel’s more liberated ideas on motherhood, or is she one version of the impossibility of “getting black motherhood right”? Try to integrate into your response the scene later in this chapter when Helene walks through the “white” train car on her way to the “colored” train car and is humiliated by the porter for doing so.

4. Nel ends the chapter, “1920,” with a kind of epiphany.

“I’m me, she whispered. “Me.”

Nel didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand, she knew exactly what she meant.

“I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.”

Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering her like power, like joy, like fear (28).

Does this nascent sense of her own identity, separate and independent from her mother, suggest that motherhood – certainly the way Helene defines it – has less influence over the formation of children’s selves? Or is this a subjective experience that Nel is having that actually doesn’t reflect the full picture of how she is formed? How does all this relate to the third debatable question, on African-American motherhood?

“1921” & “1922”

1. Eva lost her leg – apparently either having had intentionally run over by a train so that she could collect insurance money, or having sold it to a hospital (which seems unlikely). What does this act suggest about either the question of the novel’s possible critique of the condition of African-American men, or of whether it is suggesting an alternative to conventional images of African-American motherhood?

2. When her estranged husband BoyBoy comes back to visit Bottom, three years after the birth of their last child Plum, Eva observes, “Underneath all of that shine she saw defeat in the stalk of his neck, and the curious tight way he held his shoulders” (36). She soon realizes that she hates BoyBoy. “Once when Hannah accused her of hating colored people, Eva said only hated one, Hannah’s father BoyBoy, and it was hating him that kept her alive and happy” (37). What is the thematic meaning and significance of her encounter with BoyBoy and the feeling she is left with?

3. “With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. . . . The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake” (41). Hannah is said to have “rippled with sex” (42). Even Eva flirted and “pecked” with a steady stream of male callers. What is the novel’s attitude toward descriptions of the Peace women’s sexuality? How do we know?
4. In a harrowing scene, Eva burns Plum alive. Is there any way to redeem or justify this act? Is it possible that the novel is asking us as readers to place this act in a context that we may be resistant to? Might this scene imply that the novel is in some sort of non-realistic genre of literature, one more dream-like or phantasmagoric? What signs are there in the full telling of this act of murder that Morrison doesn’t want the reader to summarily condemn it?
5. Hannah has a July evening chat about their children with two of her friends.

“My Rudy minds his daddy. He just wild with me. Be glad when he growed and gone.”

Hannah smiled and said, “Shut your mouth. You love the ground he pee on.”

“Sure I do. But he still a pain. Can’t help loving your own children. No matter what they do.”

“Well, Hester grown now and I can’t say love is exactly what I feel.”

“Sure you do. You love her, like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (57).

What implications does this dialogue have for the way that the novel depicts motherhood and the responsibilities, constraints, and joys of motherhood?

6. Chicken Little’s death is one of the most tersely described in all of American literature. “When he slipped from [Sula’s] hands and sailed away out over the water they could still hear his bubbly laughter. The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank” (61). Sula and Nel don’t try to save him – though they also probably do not realize he is drowning until it is too late – and they also express much more fear that they will have been seen than they do sorrow over the boy’s death. They think Shadrack is the only witness, and before they can ask him if he saw the incident, and if he will keep it quiet, he says one word, “Always” (62). This episode has some similar and some parallel qualities to the Plum’s incineration. Are there literary qualities in its narrative that mark the novel as part of a non-realistic literary genre? What is the novel’s attitude toward the incident, and Nel and Sula’s role in it? How does the novel want us as readers to feel about it? How do you know?

“1923” & “1927”

1. The chapter “1923” begins with Hannah questioning Eva about her relationship to her children.

“Mama, did you ever love us? . . . I mean did you? You know. When we was little.”

Eva’s hand moved snail-like down her thigh toward her stump, but stopped short of it to realign a pleat. “No, I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’.”

“Oh, well, I was just wonderin’.” Hannah appeared to be through with the subject.

“An evil wonderin’ if I ever heard one. . . . You settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t.”
“I didn’t mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin; ‘bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?”
“Play? 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. N----s was dying like flies” (67-68).

What do we learn about the characterization of both Hannah and Eva through this dialogue? Explicate the way this dialogue helps to balance – present reasons on both sides – the question about the novel’s motherhood thematic meaning.

2. Eva continues discussing motherhood with Hannah, speaking “with two voices[,] like two people were talking at the same time” (71).

“Boys is hard to bear. You wouldn’t know that but they is. It was such a carryin’ on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to get back in. After all that carrin’ on, just getting’ him out and keepin’ him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well. . . I ain’t got the room no more even if he could do it. There wan’t space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin’ back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn’t do it again” (71).

This evocating and pathos-filled monologue resonates with both the first debatable question – about whether the novel critiques the condition of black males – and the second debatable question, on motherhood. How does it do so?

3. Eva leaps from her second floor window in “1923,” to try to put out the fire that was burning Hannah alive. Despite the heroism of the act, Hannah dies. Sula, while this happens, looks on, dispassionately. Analyze the moral implications of this episode in the novel.

4. In the chapter “1927,” Nel marries Jude: “The two of them together would make one Jude,” (83) the narrator pointedly adds. It is Nel’s friendship with Sula that seems to be the deeper, more fulfilling personal relationship for her. Nel’s “parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had. Only with Sula did that quality have free reign, but their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s. During all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula” (83). At the height of their friendship and their closeness, what does Nel and Sula’s friendship mean to each other? What does it mean to the reader?

“1937” & “1939”

1. Ten years later, in Part Two, Sula and Eva have an agitated argument. Eva begins it.

“Don’t let your mouth start nothing that your ass can’t stand. When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you.”

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

“Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man.”

“You did.”

“Not by choice” (92).

Analyze the full disputatious conversation they have here in this chapter. Explicate its bearing on all three debatable questions.

2. What do these short passages from the narrator tell us about Sula’s character.

Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves. Other people seemed to turn their volume on and up and Sula was in the room (95).

Sula, like always, was incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions. When it came to matters of grave importance, she behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out (101).

Do these descriptions agree with each other or do they show us contradictions in Sula’s character? Cite two examples from the narrative that illustrate these characterizations.

3. Jude leaves his new wife Nel for Sula, a woman he earlier indicated (104) he wasn’t even sexually attracted to. What is the novel’s attitude toward and judgment of this affair?
4. The people of Bottom had a surprising reaction to the highly active sexuality Sula brought back with her. “They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst” (117). How does Sula (an “artist with no art form” 121) in her sexuality – and the reactions of others – develop the sexual liberation theme in the novel?
5. Sula changes behaviors after meeting Ajax. “Sula began to discover what possession was. Not love, perhaps, but possession or at least the desire for it” (131). How does her relationship with Ajax inflect the sexual liberation thematic meaning of *Sula*?

“1940,” “1941,” & “1965”

1. In Sula’s serious illness, Nel brings her medicine, and the two have a very meaningful, resonant conversation.

“I sure did live in this world,” [Sula says].

“Really? What have you got to show for it?”

“Show? To sho? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me.”

“Lonely, ain’t it.”

“Yes. But my lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely” (143).

Which side of this spat does the novel come down on? Whose side is Morrison on, here, and how do you know?

2. Before she dies, Sula has reflective thoughts about crucial events in her life (and in the novel) – why she had an affair with Jude, her looking on as Hannah burned alive, her death itself (144-149). How do these final, death-bed reflections affect the reader’s view and understanding of Sula as a character?

3. Eva ends her life seemingly with some meanness and venom.

After the way Eva had just treated her, accused her, she wondered if the townspeople hadn’t been right the first time. Eva *was* mean. Sula had even said so. There was no good reason for her to speak so. Feeble-minded or not. Old. Whatever. Eva know what she was doing. Always had. She had stayed away from Sula’s funeral and accused Nel of drowning Chicken Little for spite (171).

How does Eva’s ending affect the novel’s thematic ideas on motherhood?

4. Nel ends the novel with an epiphany: she has been mourning the loss of her best friend, and the most important person in her life, Sula, ever since she ran away with her husband, Nel. What does this revelation mean for our interpretation of *Sula*?

Additional Questions on the Female Sexuality Debatable Issue

1. Could Sula achieve her self-discovery without sex with men? Is part of her enjoyment caused by the inversion of the power dynamics? Would this be possible in a relationship with a woman?

2. Is the digging scene a commentary on the loss of innocence and purity when men come into play or a celebration of their friendship?



3. *Sula* acknowledges that wifehood is often conflated with motherhood, in which the woman sacrifices her body and identity for her husband. What does this suggest, from the point of view of the novel, about relationships between men and women? Is an equitable relationship between men and women possible, according to *Sula*?