



Sula (1973), by Toni Morrison Debatable Questions

These are debatable questions that we will be using to guide our reading, discussion, and interpretation of Toni Morrison's breakthrough novel, *Sula*. Possible interpretive positions follow each question; these are not the only possible positions that can be taken, but they do model and present viable, defensible positions.

We will also address interpretive and formalistic questions about the novel that you create.

- (1) In *Sula* most of the men are conspicuously weak, impassive, or deeply wounded. For example, Plum is a heroin addict who, as an adult, lives with his mother, Eva, until she ends his life. Shadrack comes back from World War I shell-shocked and obsessed with death. Even Jude seems to lack full agency when he has an affair with Sula and he leaves Nel. Is *Sula* a critique of the condition of the African-American male?

In *Sula* Toni Morrison identifies the fallen condition of the black male as an important cause of the psychological and social pathologies that have afflicted African-American communities.

Sula is a feminist novel, in that it credits women with often unacknowledged strength and agency, but far from pointing a finger at the black men in the novel it actually elevates them as bearing the brunt of American racism.

- (2) *Sula* lacks a character that the reader can recognize as a model mother, conventionally understood. Hannah is deeply flawed in her parental relationship with Sula. Helene is a rather distant, unemotional, rigid figure in Nel's life. And Eva, who does demonstrate motherly caring and affection, also ends the life of her only son, Plum. Nevertheless, Toni Morrison seems to be thinking continuously and deeply through the novel about motherhood, and what it means to be a mother, particularly in the African-American community. In *Sula*, does Morrison subvert common images and clichés of the black matriarch in order to propose a liberated, independent alternative,

whose moral strength comes in part from her self-concern? Or, is the novel an unhappy one, depicting an alternative to the conventional black matriarch but one that, far from being emancipated and more ethical, is damaged and damaging.

No mother will ever be perfect, and the mothers in *Sula* are all to varying degrees imperfect, but Toni Morrison is presenting the reader with images of black motherhood that are more liberated, more realistic, and more humane than common, idealized, clichéd versions of black matriarchy.

Sula is an unhappy story fundamentally for this reason: it realistically and very particularly shows how the African-American mother is essential for the well-being of the black family *and* the impossibility of the black mother ever fulfilling the unaccomplishable role that this society has defined for her.

- (3) **During her time away from Medallion, and then after her return, Sula is a sexually liberated – the townsfolk would say promiscuous – woman, taking many lovers and fully embracing her own continually returning physical desire for men. What is the novel’s attitude toward liberated sexuality?**

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison is writing from a sympathetic position toward the sexual revolution that our nation recently went through in the 1960s, depicting social condemnation of fully empowered female sexuality as unfair, unenlightened, and basically envious.

Sula is actually a novel that is a cautionary story in the face of unfettered, amoral, voracious sexuality, equating it with a self-absorption and decadence that undercuts the essential family unit.

- (4) **In *Sula*, romantic relationships between men and women are often devalued and delegitimized, sometimes represented as an imbalanced financial exchange in which women sacrifice their identities and needs for physical protection and the validation found in being needed. The love between childhood friends Nel and Sula is the most enduring and pure love in the novel, and is sometimes described with allusive sexual imagery. This suggests a fundamental interpretive question: Is *Sula* a disguised celebration of female homosexuality, or is it an assertion of the superiority of female platonic friendship over the exploitations inherent to heteronormative romantic relationships? Or, is its gendered theme some third (possibly hybrid) alternative?**

Sula is a story about the ways in which gay love emerges under the confines of a heteronormative society.

Sula is a story about the idyllic, nonsexual purity of female friendship in which, unlike in male-female romantic relationships, both parties are equal and neither is subordinated to the other.

Sula rejects the distinction between romantic love and friendship by blurring the lines between the two in order to propose the inherent inter-connection between emotional and sexual desire.