



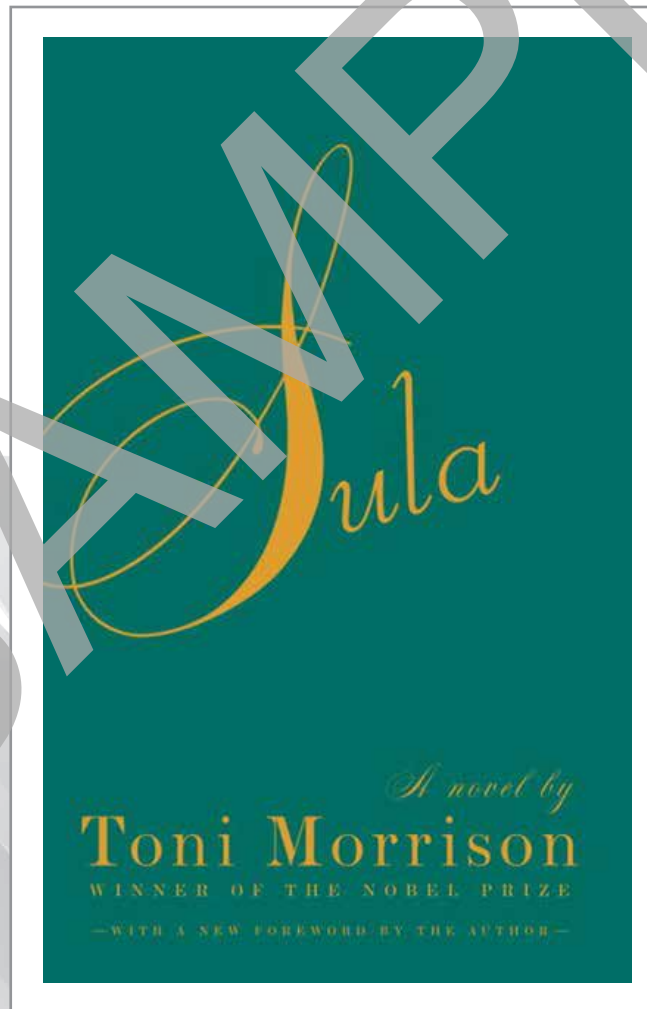
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Sula

Toni Morrison



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Sula

Toni Morrison

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Critical Thinking

Analysis, compare/contrast,
research, evaluation

Comprehension

Predicting, inferencing,
character development,
thematic development

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
application

Listening/Speaking

Presentation, discussion,
debate

Writing

Poetry, essay, prose

Literary Elements

Foreshadowing, theme,
characterization, setting,
allusion

Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, drawing;
History—research;
Music—connections;
Drama—script, debate

Genre: fiction

Setting: 1919–1965; Medallion, Ohio

Point of View: third-person omniscient

Conflict: person vs. person, person vs. society, person vs. self

Themes: friendship, love, loyalty, betrayal, grief, social perceptions, social tolerance, gender roles, morality/immorality

Tone: serious, tragic, humorous on occasion

Date of First Publication: 1974

Summary

Nel Wright and Sula Peace are growing up during the Depression era in the black community of Medallion, Ohio—a hilltop area ironically known by the locals as “the Bottom.” The two girls forge a strong friendship during their youth and bond over their struggles to define themselves before the stigmas assigned by their community can define them. Tragedy frequently strikes Sula’s chaotic family, and when Sula accidentally drowns a young boy, the girls’ bond only strengthens with their secret. As grown women, Nel marries and settles into a traditional life in town while Sula continues to rebel against society during her travels around the country. Sula’s experiences outside of Medallion prove to be disappointing, and when she returns to her hometown, she reunites with Nel but is disconcerted with the changes in her friend. Sula, who has always shared everything of Nel’s in the past, has an affair with Nel’s husband Jude. Jude leaves Nel with three children and what Nel thinks are only feelings of betrayal and resentment for her childhood friend. Sula—different, misunderstood, and partial to married men—becomes the scourge of the town. Nel does not speak to Sula again until Sula is on her deathbed and, even then, Sula fails to give Nel the answers or apology she desires. As an older woman, having lived many years after Sula’s death, Nel realizes that she has not been mourning the loss of Jude all this time; it was Sula she had always missed.

About the Author

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, renowned author Toni Morrison has written literature that thoroughly explores African-American culture, society, concerns, and ideologies. Morrison’s family was poor and hardworking, relocating from the south to Ohio in hopes of better prospects. Her father labored at various jobs from road construction to shipyard metal-welding. Morrison graduated with honors from Lorain High School and continued her academic career at Howard and Cornell Universities. At Howard University in Washington, D.C., after having her first name mispronounced time and time again, Morrison changed her first name to Toni, a shortened version of her middle name. While attending Howard University, she also met and married her husband, Harold Morrison, with whom she had two sons. The couple later divorced.

Toni Morrison’s work has earned her many literary awards, including the Ohioana Book Award (*Sula*), the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award (*Song of Solomon*), the National Book Critics Circle Award (*Song of Solomon*), the Pulitzer Prize (*Beloved*), and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Morrison was the first African-American woman to receive the Nobel Prize.

Background Information

- 1. Significance of Setting:** *Sula* is set in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio, where white people live in the fertile valley region and African Americans reside in the hilltop area, which is ill-suited for farming. Medallion, though fictional, accurately represents the lives of many African Americans in Ohio in the early twentieth century and the conditions in which they lived.
- 2. Impact of Slavery:** The Underground Railroad brought many slaves to the free state of Ohio. During the post-Civil War Reconstruction Era, racial tensions arose in Ohio as freed slaves began to assimilate into their new communities. White residents of these communities, though in a “free” state, were often resistant to sharing goods, work, and neighborhoods with African Americans. *The Ohio State Monitor* reported on May 10, 1919, that between the years 1889 and 1918, 3,000 African Americans were harmed due to growing racial tensions. Social segregation was commonplace until the Ohio Civil Rights Act of 1959 was passed to legally address discrimination and segregation.
- 3. Great Migration:** Though life was far from ideal for African Americans in Ohio, it was nevertheless an improvement from the harsh conditions in the South. The Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North began around 1910 and continued through the 1940s as African-American individuals and families sought areas with less discrimination and greater opportunities for employment. Many settled, as did Toni Morrison’s own family, in Ohio. Several characters in *Sula*, including Nel’s mother Helene, came to Ohio from Louisiana.
- 4. A War Economy:** The beginning of World War I in 1914 created jobs, particularly in industrial areas, that made northern states such as Ohio even more attractive to southern migrants. While many African Americans filled jobs vacated by the men who had gone off to war, many others signed on to join the fight abroad. According to national archives, 380,000 African Americans served during World War I. More than half were sent to the front lines in Europe in segregated troops. In *Sula*, the characters Shadrack and Plum return from the war with limited prospects and altered personalities due to the war’s emotional impact.
- 5. The Great Depression:** The Wall Street Crash of 1929 spurred the Great Depression that left 50 percent of African Americans unemployed—a much larger percentage than whites. Jobs were frequently taken from black workers and given to whites. Despite the fact that President Roosevelt’s New Deal aimed to create jobs and better lives for all, discrimination against the hiring of African-American workers continued. In *Sula*, the government’s tunnel excavation on New River Road exemplifies this false hope and obvious discrimination as the African-American characters are passed over in favor of white workers.

1940–1965

After a long separation, Nel visits Sula when she learns Sula is very sick and is bedridden. Shortly after the visit, Sula dies. While the townspeople are happy about her death, it has an overall negative effect on the town. At the same time, an ice storm hits, destroying crops, and scarlet fever and other illnesses spread. When pleasant weather finally returns in January, the Bottom residents are so giddy with relief that they join Shadrack's annual parade in record numbers. Shadrack reveals his perspective of the day Chicken Little was drowned. Unlike the others, he mourns Sula's death. The parade leads the Bottom residents to New River Road. Still angry that they never received the government jobs they were promised, many begin ransacking the site and inadvertently cause a collapse that kills them. Shadrack survives. The year 1965 brings more integration to Medallion. Nel visits Eva in the nursing home. Shortly after the visit, Nel realizes that it hasn't been Jude she has missed all these years but Sula.

Vocabulary
unimpassioned
respite
undergirded
solicitous
malevolence
accustomed
serenity
rambunctious

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think Nel hopes to achieve by visiting Sula? Does she accomplish this? Why or why not? (*Nel hopes to discover why Sula would break up Nel's marriage the way she did, with total disregard for Nel's feelings. Sula tells her that Jude "just filled up the space" [p. 144] she felt was all around her. She then asks Nel why, if they were such good friends, she couldn't get over it. So Nel gets an answer, just not the one she was hoping for.*)
2. Sula says, after Nel leaves, that at one time they were "two throats and one eye and [they] had no price" (p. 147). What do you think the statement means? (*She means that they were two distinct individuals who viewed things the same way and existed outside the norm, valuing nothing as others in their community do.*)
3. Describe the mental pictures Sula sees as she enters the delirium that precedes her death. What symbolism do the images have? Are they reminiscent of other moments in the novel? (*Sula sees mental images that remind her of different people she has met and feelings she has felt throughout her life. One image she sees in her mind is the Clabber Girls Baking Powder lady. The Powder lady disintegrates before her, and Sula tries to stuff all of the dust into her pockets. However, the powder billows like smoke and chokes her. The "dust" may symbolize Hannah's ashes, reminding Sula of her mother's or Plum's death. It may also represent the disintegration of Nel and Sula's friendship. When Sula thinks she will be carried "down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near, and she would curl into its heavy softness" [p. 149], this is possibly reminiscent of Chicken Little's drowning. Also, when Sula concentrates on the word "always," she is almost reminded of Shadrack, but can't quite remember that it was he who said that. Answers will vary.*)
4. What is significant about Sula's final thought? (*However Sula may have treated Nel, her final thought is of her. Sula did indeed care about Nel.*)
5. What "signs" do the residents of the Bottom believe have come with Sula's death? (*They feel conditions for them are immediately improving. Construction is set to begin on a new tunnel, and it seems that African Americans will be recruited to work on it. Also, a proper nursing home is constructed, and Eva is moved there.*)
6. What actually follows those signs of hope, and what might this say about Sula? (*sickness, the ice storm, the false hope of attaining construction jobs; The signs are misunderstood just as Sula's intentions were misunderstood.*)

7. Shadrack figures prominently into the novel at the beginning and then again at the end. What significance does his perspective on the day Chicken Little was drowned have to the reader? *(Shadrack reveals that he did not actually witness Chicken Little's drowning and that he said "always" in response to Sula's searching glance to assure the young, crying girl of the permanency of life. Shadrack, who was the pariah of the community, is revealed to be Sula's only real connection to society. She thinks she dies unloved, but Shadrack has always cared for her in his own way.)*
8. What happens on National Suicide Day the year Sula dies? Why is this ironic? *(Residents of the Bottom, happy due to the good weather, finally join Shadrack in his one-man parade. The procession ends up at the New River Road tunnel, and as residents destroy the excavation site out of anger, the tunnel collapses and kills numerous people. It is ironic that people die on National Suicide Day, when before no one would have thought of joining Shadrack's procession.)*

Supplementary Activities

1. Eva claims that Nel and Sula are the same person. Using the Venn diagram you created as a visual aid, write a two- to three-paragraph response stating whether you agree or disagree with Eva's statement.
2. Complete the Conflict chart on page 26 of this guide for Nel.
3. Using the newspaper graphic on page 27 of this guide, write a news story about Sula's death and the events that follow.

Character Analysis Blocks

Directions: Describe Sula using the blocks below.

<i>Who is the character?</i>			
<i>What does the character do?</i>		<i>Why does she do it?</i>	
<i>What, if anything, is significant about the character's name?</i>	<i>What is the nature of this character's actions? (reactive, active, important, consequential, secondary)</i>	<i>What is the significance of the book's time and place to the character?</i>	
<i>What is unusual or important about the character?</i>	<i>How does the character change in the story?</i>	<i>Does the character remind you of another character from another book? Who?</i>	<i>Do you know anyone similar to this character?</i>