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Tracing Toni Morrison's Narrative Strategies in Sula: The Afterlife of Slavery in Black Narrative Form

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Toni Morrison's *Sula* as a continuation and transformation of the Black narrative tradition, particularly the legacy of slave narratives, through a narratological–hermeneutic approach. While earlier slave narratives sought to expose the brutality of slavery through linear and testimonial forms, *Sula* reconfigures this tradition by focusing on the psychological, social, and communal afterlives of slavery within a post-emancipation Black community. Using qualitative close reading informed by narratology and hermeneutics, this research analyzes how Morrison employs fragmented chronology, shifting focalization, symbolic settings, narrative gaps, and morally complex characterization to reconstruct Black history as a lived and inherited experience. The findings demonstrate that Morrison's narrative strategies deliberately disrupt linear historiography, privileging memory, communal voice, and emotional resonance over chronological documentation. By positioning readers as active participants in meaning-making, *Sula* functions as a living archive of Black cultural memory and a medium of intergenerational transmission. This study contributes to African American literary scholarship by shifting attention from thematic analysis to narrative form, arguing that Morrison's storytelling operates as an intentional act of cultural preservation, resistance, and historical interpretation.

KEYWORDS

Morrison
Sula
black community
slave narrative
cultural memory

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Sula* draws upon the long-standing tradition of Black narrative as a means of preserving and transmitting collective historical experience. Historically, Black storytelling, particularly in the form of slave narrative functioned as both personal testimony and communal documentation, exposing slavery as a system of profound physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual deprivation. While these earlier narratives centered explicitly on slavery as an external institution, *Sula* reconfigures this tradition by examining the lingering psychological and social consequences of that history within a post-emancipation Black community. Through fragmented narrative structure, communal memory, and morally complex characterization, Morrison reconstructs Black history as an inherited and lived experience rather than a closed historical event. In doing so, the novel becomes a vital medium through which the complex legacy of Black suffering, resilience, and identity is transmitted to younger generations who must confront the enduring effects of a traumatic past.

As Olney (1984, 52) notes, nearly all slave narratives shared a central purpose: to expose the truth about slavery and work toward its abolition. These narratives often stemmed from an organized group of "sponsors" who had specific motives and intentions, which were well

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understood by both the narrators and the audiences. These stories were constructed with a clear sense of mission—to reveal the horrors of slavery and persuade readers, particularly white readers, of the humanity of enslaved people and the moral urgency of ending the institution. Thus, while the stories were deeply personal, they were also politically and socially pointed, directed toward a shared audience with a collective aim.

Structurally, traditional slave narratives followed a linear, chronological format, clearly separating past from present. They often marked the journey from enslavement to emancipation, reinforcing the idea of a transition from darkness to light. However, contemporary African American writers have disrupted these conventions. Seeking to emphasize the enduring links between past and present, modern Black authors have developed narrative strategies that blur linear timelines and challenge fixed historical boundaries. In this way, they assert that the legacy of slavery continues to inform contemporary Black life, memory, and identity.

Toni Morrison, one of the most influential contemporary African American writers, presents a distinct narrative strategy in her work. She recognizes the power of narrative not merely as a storytelling tool but as a way of organizing and transmitting knowledge. Morrison believes that narratives are both moral and instructive, and that they serve as powerful representations of Black communal life. She deliberately adopts narrative forms to emphasize their cultural and ethical importance. According to Morrison (in Hariyanti et al., 2020), slave narratives were written to achieve two major goals: first, to present a personal story that also represents the race, and second, to persuade non-Black readers of the humanity of Black people and the necessity of abolishing slavery.

Morrison's approach diverges significantly from traditional slave narratives. Rather than merely telling stories, she engages the reader in a much deeper way. As Olney (1984, 387) observes, Morrison's writing demands active participation from her readers. She discourages passive consumption of her texts and invites readers to move beyond the surface of the narrative. She challenges them not to rely solely on their literary experiences, but instead to approach her work with the openness of an illiterate or preliterate reader, someone who uses imagination and intuition to uncover meaning. Morrison's narrative technique thus dismantles conventional literary expectations and places interpretive responsibility in the hands of the reader.

One of the most illustrative examples of Morrison's narrative strategy can be found in her novel *Sula*, first published in 1973. Since its release, *Sula* has garnered critical attention both in the United States and globally, particularly among scholars of literature and Black studies. The novel has inspired a range of scholarly works including *Analysis on Character's Behavioral Alienation in Sula* (Yan, 2022), *Black Feminist Spirit Against Racism and Sexism as Reflected in Sula* (Que, 2010), *When Communities Fall: A Critical Analysis of Toni Morrison's Sula* (Morrison and Saigh, 2024), *Essentialism and Self-Identity Construction in Toni Morrison's "Sula"* (Zhang, 2023), and *Power and Resistance in Toni Morrison's Sula and Paradise: A Foucauldian Study* (Sharmin, 2023). These studies primarily explore the themes and characters of the novel, often in relation to Morrison's broader socio-political commentary.

While such studies focus largely on the novel's content, this paper seeks to examine Morrison's narrative strategy in *Sula*. It aims to explore how Morrison employs form, structure, and reader engagement as key narrative tools. Unlike the linear, straightforward approach of traditional slave narratives, *Sula* features a fragmented, multi-perspective structure. Time shifts back and forth, and memory plays a significant role in shaping the plot. This disruption of temporal order reflects Morrison's belief in the cyclical nature of Black history and experience. The past is never fully behind; it reverberates through the present and shapes future identities.

Moreover, Morrison uses silence, ambiguity, and narrative gaps to mirror the untold or suppressed stories within Black history. In *Sula*, these narrative absences are intentional and significant. Morrison does not seek to provide every answer; rather, she creates space for the reader to ask questions, to imagine what has been silenced, and to participate in reconstructing meaning. This strategy reflects her belief that narrative is a living, communal action, not a static or solitary one. The reader becomes part of the storytelling process, responsible for interpreting and emotionally investing in the characters and their experiences.

By refusing to follow conventional literary forms and by rejecting complete narrative closure, Morrison transforms the act of reading into a moral and intellectual engagement. She challenges her audience to confront the continuing legacies of slavery, gender oppression, and racial injustice. Her use of non-linear narrative, symbolic gaps, and moral ambiguity positions her work not just as literature, but as a dynamic medium of cultural memory and resistance.

In conclusion, Toni Morrison's narrative strategy in *Sula* marks a significant departure from the traditional slave narratives that preceded her. While she honors the foundational role of those early narratives in revealing the horrors of slavery and asserting Black humanity, Morrison adapts and expands their function. She redefines narrative as a participatory, communal act—one that refuses simplification and requires moral and emotional investment from the reader. This study addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship by shifting attention from thematic and character-based readings of *Sula* to a focused examination of Morrison's narrative strategies as instruments of historical reconstruction and cultural transmission. While previous studies have largely emphasized issues of feminism, identity, and racial politics, this paper argues that Morrison's innovative use of fragmented chronology, communal memory, narrative silence, and reader participation fundamentally transforms the legacy of the slave narrative tradition. By analyzing how narrative form itself functions as a living archive of Black experience, this research demonstrates that *Sula* not only represents Black history but actively teaches readers how to remember, interpret, and inherit its enduring legacies.

2. Method

This research employs a qualitative narratological–hermeneutic methodology to analyze Toni Morrison's *Sula*, with particular attention to how narrative strategies operate across plot, setting, characterization, and thematic construction. Narratology provides the analytical tools for examining the formal organization of the narratives such as temporal structure, focalization, narrative voice, and plot arrangement, while hermeneutics guides the interpretation of how these formal elements generate cultural, historical, and ethical meaning. This combined approach is especially appropriate given that *Sula* resists linear storytelling and instead constructs meaning through memory, fragmentation, and communal perspective.

The primary data source of this study is the novel *Sula* itself. Analysis is conducted through close reading informed by narratological categories, focusing on textual moments that exemplify Morrison's manipulation of time, voice, and perspective. In relation to plot, the study examines Morrison's non-linear and cyclical narrative structure, including her use of stream-of-consciousness techniques and her decision to begin the novel with the destruction of the Bottom. These formal strategies are analyzed narratologically (drawing on Genette's concepts of temporality and order) and interpreted hermeneutically as representations of memory, historical rupture, and the persistence of the past in the present.

In analyzing setting, the study treats the Bottom not merely as a geographical backdrop but as a narrative and cultural space. Using a hermeneutic lens, the research interprets the setting as a repository of collective memory shaped by historical forces such as the Great Migration, racial capitalism, and segregation. Narratologically, attention is paid to how the setting is repeatedly focalized through communal perception rather than individual description, reinforcing the idea of the Black community itself as a narrative agent.

The analysis of characters is grounded in narratological concepts of focalization, characterization, and symbolic function. Characters such as Sula, Nel, Eva, Hannah, and Shadrack are examined as narrative constructions rather than autobiographical representations. Drawing on Morrison's own statements and Gates Jr.'s theory of Black signification, the study interprets these characters hermeneutically as symbolic figures who embody historical trauma, gendered constraint, resistance, and communal tension. Special attention is given to how character behavior and interiority are shaped by historical conditions rather than individual psychology alone.

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For themes, the study applies a hermeneutic reading that situates recurring motifs—such as oppression, resignation, individuality, community, gendered power, and historical loss—within broader African American historical experience. These themes are not treated as abstract ideas but as outcomes of Morrison's narrative strategies. The analysis demonstrates how narrative form (fragmentation, silence, repetition, and delayed revelation) produces thematic meaning, particularly in representing the internalized effects of systemic racism and the erosion of communal identity.

Secondary sources, including scholarly criticism and theoretical works by Gérard Genette, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., are used to support and contextualize the analysis. These frameworks enable the study to link Morrison's technical narrative choices—such as polyphony, dialogism, and non-linear temporality—to African American oral traditions, musical forms (blues and jazz), and post–slave-narrative storytelling practices.

The analytical process is interpretive and iterative, characteristic of hermeneutic inquiry. Narrative patterns and strategies identified through close reading are cross-referenced with existing scholarship to ensure analytical rigor. Rather than quantifying narrative elements, the study evaluates how they function culturally and ethically to reconstruct Black historical experience and transmit it to readers.

Ethical considerations are minimal, as the research relies solely on publicly available literary texts and published academic sources. All sources are cited according to academic standards to maintain scholarly integrity.

Overall, this narratological–hermeneutic methodology provides a coherent framework that directly corresponds to the Results and Discussion sections. By systematically analyzing plot, setting, characters, and themes as narrative constructs, the study demonstrates how Morrison's storytelling in *Sula* operates as a form of historical memory, cultural critique, and intergenerational transmission of Black experience.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

Morrison's narrative strategies are obviously seen in the way she constructs the plot, and placing black community not only as the setting of time and place but also providing the cultural setting for the thoughts and the actions of characters and themes as well.

3.1.1 Plot

Toni Morrison's narrative technique in *Sula* exemplifies her deliberate use of modernist literary forms, particularly the **stream of consciousness**. The novel's plot is arranged in such a way that it undermines strict chronological order, creating a fluid interplay between past, present, and future. This structure mirrors the inner workings of memory and consciousness, allowing Morrison to portray time as nonlinear and cyclical. In *The Art of Fiction* (Morrison, 1993), she explains that the narrative's structure—developed through a process of trial and error—was as significant to her as the content itself. She expresses a desire for the plot to reflect the process of revelation, likening it to a detective story where key moments are presented upfront, compelling the reader to piece together how events unfolded. She emphasizes that the story should guide the reader from beginning to end, but also offer "the delight to be found in moving away from the story and coming back to it, looking around it, and through it, as though it was a prism, constantly turning."

This non-linear, prism-like narrative structure reinforces one of Morrison's central themes: the persistence of the past in the present. By allowing time to shift fluidly, Morrison invites readers to recognize how memory, trauma, and history are not confined to a single moment but instead echo throughout generations. She illustrates how memory becomes a powerful tool for organizing and finding meaning within chaos—especially the dislocations and disfigurements caused by historical and social upheaval. Morrison's technique is deeply rooted in African American cultural

forms, particularly blues and jazz. These musical traditions—marked by improvisation, variation, and emotional depths serve as a metaphor for her narrative style. As Morrison herself emphasizes, the novel should possess the same improvisational qualities as music (Morrison, 2008, 199).

This musical and non-linear method is especially evident in how Morrison constructs the opening of *Sula*. She begins the novel not at the chronological start of the story but at the symbolic end—with the destruction of the Black neighborhood known as the Bottom. By doing so, Morrison immediately centers the loss of Black space and community. The first pages reveal how a once-thriving area has been transformed into the site of a white-dominated development. As she writes, "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" (Morrison, 1973, 3). The reader is presented with a vivid and nostalgic picture of a vanished Black world, filled with natural beauty, community life, and cultural landmarks.

Through this evocative opening passage, Morrison portrays a literal and symbolic uprooting. The white developers replace the Bottom's homes and trees with television towers and golf courses, erasing both physical space and cultural memory. The passage is rich with sensory and emotional detail: the beaches and pear trees are gone, as are the familiar community spaces such as the Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, and Reba's Grill. Each of these places carries cultural significance and collective memory, now reduced to ruins by commercial interests. This juxtaposition between what was and what remains—between memory and erasure—sets the tone for the rest of the novel.

Morrison's decision to reveal the destruction of the Bottom at the outset is a deliberate narrative strategy that aligns with her belief in engaging the reader through both emotional and intellectual curiosity. It functions much like the hook in a detective story: the reader knows what has happened, but not how or why. This technique, Morrison believes, is what propels the reader through the novel. By beginning with the end, she constructs a narrative tension that invites deeper reflection and investigation. As Morrison elaborates in her foreword to *Sula*, "I tried to represent discriminatory, prosecutorial racial oppression as well as the community's efforts to remain stable and healthy: the neighborhood has been almost completely swept away by commercial interests (a golf course), but the remains of what sustained it... are what the 'valley man,' the stranger, sees—or could have seen" (Morrison, 1973, xvi–xvii).

This quotation reveals Morrison's dual focus: not only the external forces that threaten Black communities, but also the internal cultural elements—music, religion, irony, craft—that persist in resistance. She underscores that although the physical landscape has changed, the spiritual and communal essence of the Bottom lives on. The outsider might only see what is left, but Morrison invites the reader to imagine what it once was. The opening thus becomes more than a scene-setting device; it acts as a portal into a deeper, layered memory, where the narrative doubles back to uncover the emotional and historical roots of the community's collapse.

What Morrison does in *Sula* is more than storytelling, she reconstructs memory as a living, shifting force. Her writing mimics the rhythms of jazz and blues not only in form but also in emotional expression, layering grief, resistance, pride, and survival. Just as these musical forms allow for improvisation and variation, Morrison's plot structure allows for unexpected narrative detours and reflections. The reader is not meant to follow a single, unbroken path, but rather to experience the novel as one might experience a song—looping back, reinterpreting, and discovering new meaning with each pass.

In conclusion, Morrison's use of stream-of-consciousness structure, combined with her jazz-like narrative style, transforms *Sula* into a powerful meditation on memory, loss, and resistance. By beginning at the end and revealing the destruction of the Bottom at the start, she challenges conventional plot progression and emphasizes the lingering presence of the past. Her narrative does not just tell a story, it requires the reader to actively engage, reflect, and listen. Through improvisational structure and historical consciousness, Morrison ensures that the legacy of Black life, despite erasure, continues to echo through every page.

3.1.2 Setting

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The setting of *Sula* is a small town in Ohio, specifically on a hillside area ironically named "Bottom." The story spans the years from 1919 to 1965—a historically significant period for African Americans in the United States. This era marks the Great Migration, when many Black families left the rural South in search of better economic opportunities in northern and Midwestern cities. During this time, "black neighborhoods" began to form in places that had never before seen a substantial Black population. These demographic shifts played a crucial role in reshaping both urban landscapes and cultural identities. As Wills notes, this period also marks the moment when Black people, as a social group, were first integrated into the structures of modern capitalism, particularly as laborers and soldiers. However, this incorporation often came at the cost of cultural erasure, as collective identities began to flatten under the pressures of assimilation and economic survival (Wills in Gates Jr., 2016, 144–115).

In addition to its historical context, the period depicted in *Sula* is also deeply symbolic. According to Bennett Jr. (1993), these years were marked by contradictions—between beginnings and endings, love and hate, and despair and hope. Morrison captures these tensions through the narrative's emotional landscape and the evolving relationships within the Bottom community. The town itself, though fictional, reflects the broader realities of Black life in 20th-century America: displacement, systemic racism, economic hardship, and the constant push-and-pull between communal survival and personal freedom. The setting thus becomes more than just a backdrop; it is a living representation of historical transformation, social complexity, and the struggle to preserve identity amid rapid change.

3.1.3 Characters

Toni Morrison is renowned for her profound creativity in crafting characters who resonate deeply with readers. In *The Art of Fiction* (1993), Morrison explicitly states that she never draws directly from people in her life. She emphasizes that her characters are never autobiographical. Instead, they are fully invented, born from fragments—bits of memory or information—that serve not as historical facts, but as rich material for imaginative exploration. These fragments are transformed through Morrison's artistic vision into powerful characters whose narratives stir emotional responses and provoke critical reflection. As Morrison explains, her objective is not to recreate exact realities but to evoke emotional truths, such as illustrating "what slavery felt like, rather than how it looked."

The strength of Morrison's characters lies in their deep integration with the time and setting in which they exist. The temporal backdrop of *Sula*, for instance, spans an era described by Bennett Jr. (1993) as one marked by contradictions: beginnings and endings, love and hate, despair and hope. Within this complex period, Morrison places her vividly imagined characters in a world where survival is hard-earned and often fleeting. As Blackburn describes it, Morrison's "extravagantly beautiful, doomed characters are locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity, yet they are enormously, achingly alive." Their vibrancy, even in decay, becomes the emotional core of Morrison's work—where rage, joy, humor, and sorrow coexist (Blackburn in Sukalal Khairnar, Mahila Mahavidyalaya, and Camp 2021).

Sula, the novel's protagonist, exemplifies Morrison's approach to character creation. She was inspired not by any real individual, but by Morrison's reflection on the condition of Black women during the early 20th century. Sula is a composite of historical fragments and imaginative extrapolation. Morrison described Sula as "quite essentially black, metaphysically black," asserting that this blackness transcends biology or conformity to racial expectations. She is "New World Black," a woman who extracts agency from a state of powerlessness. She is improvisational, inventive, disruptive, and modern—qualities that make her simultaneously a product of her time and far ahead of it (Morrison, 1988).

In *Sula*, Morrison also interrogates the tension between individualism and community in Black life. Traditional Black communities place a high value on collectivism—on mutual care, loyalty, and shared survival. Stepping outside these communal boundaries often results in alienation or punishment. Morrison constructs her two central female characters, Nel and Sula, to embody this dichotomy. Nel accepts the community's laws and norms, believing in their value and

permanence, while Sula rejects them entirely. Morrison writes, "Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not. She does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all. Or ignore them." (Morrison, 1973, 83). As a result, Sula becomes the scapegoat for every misfortune in the Bottom, blamed for everything from crop failures to deaths, simply because she refuses to conform.

Sula's rejection of patriarchal norms places her at odds with her society in multiple ways. As Ni (2015) argues, Sula is condemned for three primary reasons: her rejection of traditional gender expectations, her refusal to follow the gendered norm of caring for the elderly, and her desire to emulate male autonomy. These rejections are viewed not just as acts of rebellion, but as dangerous threats to the social fabric. Sula's independence makes her unmanageable and, therefore, vilified. Her very presence destabilizes the community's fragile balance, making her symbolic of both freedom and fear. Morrison uses Sula's character to challenge how Black women's agency, particularly sexual and economic freedom—is perceived and policed within their own communities.

Morrison explores similar themes through the character of Hannah, Sula's mother, whose sexual freedom serves as a different model of female autonomy. Morrison explains that Hannah's uninhibited lifestyle, drawn from Morrison's memory of how local women viewed sexually free women—with a mix of envy and amused approval—was her initial entry point into the story. Unlike Sula, Hannah's independence is not seen as threatening because it does not challenge economic hierarchies or family structures. Her dependency on Eva, a matriarch with financial and social power, shields her from judgment. On the other hand, Eva sacrifices her physical well-being for economic stability, while Nel conforms to societal expectations through marriage. These three women reflect different responses to gender and racial constraints. As Morrison writes, "Each one a choice for characters bound by gender and race" (Morrison, 1973, xiii–xiv).

Another richly imagined character, Shadrack, originates from a fleeting historical fragment—a vague memory of Black soldiers returning from World War I. Morrison took this bit of history and transformed it into a haunting portrait of trauma and survival. Shadrack, a veteran, suffers from deep psychological scars due to the horrors of war, leading him to establish "National Suicide Day" as a way to control the chaos he feels. Morrison's creation of Shadrack was rooted in a desire to acknowledge the largely forgotten experiences of Black soldiers in WWI. While African Americans served in every U.S. conflict, their roles in World War I were often limited to support functions. Those who did fight—most notably in the 369th Infantry Regiment, the "Harlem Hellfighters"—served under French command and fought valiantly in key battles such as the Second Battle of the Marne and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive (https://www.archives.gov/).

Although the 369th Infantry Regiment is the most famous Black unit of WWI, it was far from the only one. Many African American soldiers were assigned to non-combat roles such as labor, engineering, and supply units, often under harsh and discriminatory conditions. As noted by Burger in *Rediscovering Black History* (NationalArchivesBlog, 2024), "The 369th was not the only black World War I regiment, nor the only one to fight valiantly, but it is perhaps the most famous." Morrison gives voice to these neglected experiences through Shadrack's presence in *Sula*. His mental breakdown and peculiar rituals reflect the psychological impact of war, racism, and marginalization—a trauma that is deeply personal yet historically representative.

Morrison's characters, then, are not merely fictional constructs but emotional and symbolic vessels drawn from cultural memory, historical fragments, and personal imagination. They embody more than their individual stories; they carry the weight of entire communities, historical silences, and marginalized identities. Whether through Sula's defiance, Nel's conformity, Hannah's sexuality, Eva's sacrifice, or Shadrack's trauma, each character reveals the layered experiences of Black life in 20th-century America. Morrison's gift lies in transforming bits of remembered or imagined history into profound human truth stories that challenge, unsettle, and ultimately move her readers.

In summary, Morrison's fiction resists the autobiographical while embracing the emotional resonance of history. Her characters are fully invented yet rooted in lived experience, symbolic memory, and artistic improvisation. Through the imaginative use of fragments—of war, gender roles, family dynamics, and cultural shifts, Morrison constructs a vivid tapestry of Black identity and resilience. She doesn't aim to reproduce history, but to re-feel it, to allow her readers to inhabit

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the emotional spaces left behind by silenced voices and forgotten stories. In doing so, Morrison's literature becomes not only a narrative but a living memory, a call to empathy, and an act of resistance.

3.1.4 Theme

The struggle of Black Americans—whether enslaved or free—has been a persistent and deeply instructive part of American history. From their arrival in 1619 as indentured servants to their transformation into slaves in 1661, Black people in America have endured centuries of oppression (Albanese 1999, 193). Though the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 legally ended slavery, true freedom and equality have remained elusive. Ironically, even after emancipation, African Americans continued to live in a biracial society founded on the principles of white supremacy. Their legal liberation did not dismantle the systemic racism that governed social, political, and economic life in the United States.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* reflects this ongoing struggle for dignity and agency within a racially biased society. The novel presents a vivid portrait of the Black community's efforts—both collective and individual—to survive and define their place in a world shaped by white dominance. Set in a fictional Black neighborhood called the Bottom in Medallion, Ohio, Morrison's narrative reveals the constraints imposed by racism and the internal conflicts that arise when individuals resist or submit to these pressures. Through the lives of her characters, Morrison explores how Black men and women navigate systems of power that consistently marginalize them.

Throughout the story, Morrison suggests that the people of Bottom have grown so accustomed to their condition that they no longer imagine alternatives. Their acceptance of hardship and injustice borders on fatalism. Morrison writes, "In spite of their fear, they reacted to the oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome… they let it run its course, fulfil itself and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent it happening again. And so were they with people" (Morrison 1973, 89). This resignation highlights a deeper issue: the psychological toll of prolonged oppression, where even resistance feels impossible or futile.

Morrison portrays this sense of powerlessness through several characters. Shadrack, a war veteran, returns home traumatized and unable to reintegrate into society. He creates "National Suicide Day" as a coping mechanism, parading alone every January 3rd. While the community initially fears him, they eventually normalize his ritual, and "Suicide Day becomes a part of the fabric of life in the Bottom." Similarly, Plum returns from war so broken that he regresses into infantile behavior. These characters embody the disillusionment and psychological scars that Black men bear, both from systemic racism and from their service in a country that discards them.

Jude, another central figure, experiences the humiliation of rejection due to his race. He dreams of working on the New River Road construction—a job he sees as dignified and masculine. But when he is denied the opportunity solely because he is Black, his sense of manhood and purpose is crushed. This rejection becomes a turning point. Feeling defeated, Jude proposes to Nel, not out of love but out of a need for affirmation and stability. His desire to reclaim a sense of dignity and control leads him into marriage—not as a romantic partnership, but as a social remedy for emasculation.

The plight of Black women in *Sula* mirrors that of the men, though their oppression is compounded by both race and gender. Morrison shows how Nel and Sula, despite their shared experiences, respond differently to these intersecting forces. They are acutely aware that, as Black women, they are doubly marginalized. Sula's insistence on freedom and autonomy is met with scorn and fear, while Nel chooses to conform to societal norms. When Sula declares her freedom, Nel counters, "You don't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like men. You can't be walking around independent like doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't" (Morrison 1973, 142). Nel's statement reflects internalized limitations shaped by her environment.

Nel's submission to traditional roles becomes particularly evident in her relationship with Jude. Aware of Jude's pain and frustration over being denied a "man's job," she sees it as her

responsibility to soothe him. Jude's job as a waiter emasculates him in his own eyes—it is "women's work." Nel understands that by marrying him, she restores his pride and offers him the socially sanctioned identity of "head of household." Her acceptance of his proposal stems not from romantic desire but from a sense of duty. She plays the nurturing role expected of Black women in patriarchal societies: healing the wounds inflicted on Black men by a racist world.

Sula, on the other hand, refuses to conform to these roles. She lives outside the bounds of community expectations, challenging both gender norms and the collective values of the Bottom. Her independence, sexual autonomy, and defiance make her a pariah. Yet Morrison does not portray Sula as evil, but rather as a necessary contrast to the complacency and silence of others. She is a figure of disruption who forces the community to confront its own limitations. In doing so, Sula becomes both a symbol of rebellion and a mirror reflecting the community's fears and insecurities.

Through these characters and their intertwined lives, Morrison highlights the complex dynamics of race, gender, and power. The Bottom is not just a physical place but a psychological space shaped by generations of exclusion. The people living there are not free agents but products of a deeply unequal society. Morrison uses their struggles to critique not only white supremacy but also the internalized beliefs that perpetuate submission. The novel asks difficult questions about what it means to survive, resist, conform, or rebel in a world stacked against you.

In conclusion, *Sula* is more than a story of friendship or betrayal—it is a nuanced exploration of Black life under systemic oppression. Morrison does not offer easy answers or heroic victories. Instead, she presents a community grappling with inherited pain, limited choices, and the quiet resilience of everyday survival. The characters—both men and women—are caught in cycles shaped by racism, war, poverty, and tradition. Yet within these cycles, Morrison finds moments of humanity, beauty, and complexity, urging readers to see the emotional realities behind historical and social facts.

Another poignant example of passive acceptance is seen in Nel's response to her husband's betrayal. When she witnesses Jude, her husband, in an act of intimacy with her closest friend, Sula, she does not lash out or confront them directly. Instead, she internalizes her grief, seeking solitude to contain the overwhelming pain. Rather than expressing anger, she searches for a "small place" where she can quietly grieve and hopes that, by crying, the sorrow will eventually dissolve. Nel's response reflects the deeply ingrained resilience—and resignation—that many Black women adopt in the face of personal and societal betrayal.

Sula, by contrast, is portrayed as a radical departure from the norm. She represents the figure of a modern Black woman, one who boldly rejects societal expectations and traditional gender roles. She travels freely, sleeps with many men, and has no desire for marriage or children. Morrison describes her as a woman "exploring her own thoughts and emotion, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her… hers was experimental life." (Morrison 1973, 118). This portrayal underscores Sula's commitment to personal autonomy, her refusal to be confined by the social script that dictates women's behavior—especially Black women's behavior.

Despite her boldness, Sula is also deeply restless. She is painfully aware of the community's disdain for her, and she longs for genuine connection. Her journeys from town to town do not yield meaningful relationships, and even her return to the Bottom does not bring the comfort she seeks. She expects understanding from Nel, her closest childhood friend, but finds instead that Nel, too, judges her through the same critical lens as the rest of the community. This loneliness becomes symbolic of the alienation experienced by individuals—especially women—who defy cultural norms.

Sula's sexuality becomes a particularly charged issue within the Bottom. Black men are outraged by her rumored affairs with white men, whom they believe could only have forced her into such relationships—thus interpreting her consent as betrayal. For Black women, Sula's transgressions are offensive not because she engages in affairs, but because she refuses to sleep with their husbands more than once. This rejection is interpreted as an insult to their men's worth, undermining their masculinity and leaving the women to restore their partners' pride. In this way, Sula disrupts both gender and racial hierarchies, refusing to fulfill expected roles.

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Sula is not merely a rebellious individual; she functions symbolically as the embodiment of the Black community's internal conflict. Her restlessness mirrors the community's own struggle between tradition and transformation. She wants change but fears its consequences. Only Shadrack, the war-shaken recluse, seems to grasp her duality. His repeated utterance of "always" to Sula signifies his attempt to reassure her of permanence in a world defined by flux and instability. Morrison's treatment of lovemaking in the novel is also metaphorical. It is not depicted simply as a biological act, but rather as a powerful expression of self-discovery and transformation—a social and psychological exploration of identity.

Initially, Sula views lovemaking as a source of forbidden pleasure. She revels in the sense that it is wicked, enjoying the illusion of transgression. But as her experiences multiply, she realizes that the act is neither wicked nor transformative in the way she had hoped. During intercourse, she attempts to create a tight emotional bond, but instead feels herself losing control—dominated by the man beneath her. Morrison writes, "she leaped from the edge into the soundlessness and went down howling… in a stinging awareness of the ending of things" (Morrison 1973, 126). In that moment of vulnerability, Sula confronts a deeper alienation, the solitude at the heart of her freedom.

Sula's relationship with Ajax marks a turning point in this journey of self-exploration. Unlike her other lovers, Ajax possesses a sense of freedom that mirrors her own. During their intimate moments, Sula envisions metaphorically excavating his identity: first rubbing away the "blackness" to reach gold, then scraping the gold to reveal alabaster, and finally breaking through to find the "loam," or fertile soil. This symbolic process of uncovering Ajax's layers parallels the Black community's search for identity, strength, and creative potential—what Morrison sees as the untapped richness within Black life.

Beyond the individual level, Morrison uses Sula's sexuality to reflect broader social dynamics. Sula's post-coital solitude, "she met herself, welcomed herself and joined herself in matchless harmony" (Morrison 1973, 127)—mirrors the Black community's struggle for self-recognition amidst systemic oppression. Likewise, Shadrack's reflection in the water offers a rare moment of clarity: "There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face… so unequivocal it astonished him." (Morrison 1973, 13). This encounter with his reflection affirms his existence, countering the erasure and dehumanization experienced by Black individuals in a white-dominated world.

Sula's death carries enormous symbolic weight. It represents not only the end of a challenging, defiant woman but also the metaphorical death of the Black community she embodied. Following her passing, news arrives that appears promising—more jobs for Black workers and the construction of a home for the elderly, open to them. But these developments come at a cost. As economic and social opportunities arise, the community's unity begins to dissolve. The Bottom, once a haven of Black life and resistance, becomes gentrified and abandoned by its original residents.

Morrison captures this transformation vividly: "The Bottom had collapsed… hill land was more valuable now, and those black people who had moved down… couldn't afford to come back." (Morrison 1973, 165–66). With white families buying up land and constructing homes in the hills, Black families either leave or are pushed further to the margins. The sense of collective identity is fractured, replaced by isolated homes, individual televisions, and less interpersonal connection. The community becomes less of a communal space and more a scattered collection of individuals, physically and emotionally disconnected.

This erosion of community is deeply painful, especially when contrasted with the past. Morrison writes that even the prostitutes of 1912 were "better," suggesting that the values and cohesion of the past, however imperfect, carried a kind of dignity now lost. The "new look" of Black people post-war—modernized and perhaps more socially mobile—does not compensate for the cultural and communal losses incurred. In chasing a better future, the Bottom's residents forget their roots, allowing white society to reclaim the physical and symbolic space once occupied by Black resistance.

The novel subtly critiques the pursuit of integration and economic success at the cost of cultural identity. As Black people begin to enter previously white-only spaces, they simultaneously relinquish their own spaces and traditions. Morrison does not portray this transition as purely negative, but she highlights its complexity. Progress comes with fragmentation; inclusion brings

erasure. The loss of the Bottom is not just a loss of land—it is a loss of history, memory, and belonging.

Morrison's message becomes a cautionary tale for younger generations. The past, with all its pain, still held meaning and community. In contrast, the present appears directionless and disconnected. The destruction of Black identity, she implies, is not solely the result of white aggression—it is also fueled by internal abandonment. As individuals prioritize personal gain over

Ultimately, the findings of this study demonstrate that Toni Morrison's *Sula* employs narrative strategies that are inseparable from its historical and ethical commitments. Plot fragmentation, symbolic settings, and character construction operate not in isolation but as interconnected mechanisms through which Black history is reconstructed and interrogated. Morrison's narrative method challenges dominant historiography by privileging memory, emotion, and communal voice over linear documentation. In doing so, *Sula* stands as a critical intervention in African American literary tradition—one that transforms storytelling into an act of resistance and preservation, ensuring that Black histories continue to speak beyond the limits of official record.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Sula* exemplifies Toni Morrison's masterful use of innovative narrative strategies to reconstruct, reimagine, and reclaim the silenced and fragmented histories of Black communities in America. Far beyond a simple story of two women, the novel becomes a vessel through which Morrison challenges dominant historical narratives and brings forth the voices of those long marginalized. Through her non-linear plot structure, she disrupts the Western literary tradition of chronological progression, instead privileging memory, emotional resonance, and generational echoes. This temporal fluidity allows the past, present, and future to coexist, underscoring the enduring impact of historical trauma on Black identity and community.

Morrison's characters, especially Sula and Nel, are developed not merely as individuals but as embodiments of broader social and cultural tensions—between freedom and conformity, individualism and community, change and tradition. Their experiences, decisions, and conflicts are deeply embedded within the cultural memory of the Bottom, a fictional Black neighborhood that serves as both setting and metaphor for the resilience and vulnerability of Black communal life. Morrison uses setting not as a backdrop but as a living, evolving entity that reflects the socio-political changes affecting Black Americans during the 20th century.

Her blending of myth, memory, and realism—alongside richly symbolic motifs such as water, fire, and lovemaking—imbues the novel with a lyrical and emotional depth that captures the complexity of Black existence. Morrison's narrative techniques, such as shifting perspectives, fragmented chronology, and symbolic characterization, are not merely stylistic innovations. They serve as political and cultural tools, deliberately designed to center Black voices, challenge historical erasure, and create space for alternative forms of knowledge transmission.

Moreover, Morrison's refusal to resolve her characters' lives into neat moral conclusions reinforces the ambiguity and complexity of Black womanhood. Sula is not offered as a heroine or a villain but as a question—a provocation about what it means to live freely in a world that consistently denies you that right. Through her, Morrison explores the costs of nonconformity, the loneliness of freedom, and the fierce beauty of rebellion. Nel, on the other hand, represents the quieter compromises that many women are forced to make in the name of safety, family, and community.

Ultimately, Morrison's work in *Sula* is a conscious act of cultural preservation and literary resistance. Her intricate narrative structure, rooted in oral traditions, musical rhythms, and historical consciousness, resists the flattening of Black stories into simplified or stereotypical arcs. Instead, she presents a textured, emotionally resonant portrait of Black life that demands active engagement and deep reflection from the reader.

This study reaffirms that Morrison's narrative strategies are far more than experimental techniques—they are purposeful interventions in literary and historical discourse. They allow Morrison to reclaim storytelling as a form of cultural memory, political resistance, and communal healing. By embedding Black history, voices, and identities into the very fabric of the novel,

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Morrison ensures that the struggles, dreams, and complexities of Black communities are not only remembered but honored.

By analyzing plot, character, setting, and theme through narratological and hermeneutic perspectives, this study affirms that Morrison's narrative strategies in *Sula* function as intentional acts of cultural transmission. Her use of fragmented chronology, multiple voices, and symbolic spaces positions storytelling as a means of preserving and interpreting Black historical memory. Morrison thus presents literature as a vehicle of intergenerational survival, compelling readers to confront issues of race, gender, and belonging while affirming the resilience and multiplicity of Black life. Ultimately, *Sula* demonstrates that narrative, when guided by historical consciousness, can serve as both artistic expression and a transformative force for cultural affirmation and liberation.

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