Sula

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison was born in Ohio to a working-class family that had fled the South to escape racism and economic oppression. She attended Howard University from 1949 to 1953, and later earned a Masters Degree at Cornell. She was married to Harold Morrison, an architect, from 1958 to 1964. During this time she gave birth to two children, who she raised on her own. Following her divorce from her husband, Morrison worked as an editor in New York City, where she was instrumental in publishing the first works of the political activist Angela Davis. In 1970 she published her first novel,*The Bluest Eye*. She then completed *Sula*(1973), for which she was nominated for the National Book Award; *Song of Solomon* (1977), the novel that first brought her widespread acclaim; and *Beloved* (1987), which contributed to her being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1993. Morrison taught at Rutgers, Howard, Princeton, and many other colleges and universities. Her final novel,*God Help the Child*, was published in 2015. In 2019, at the age of 88, Morrison died of complications from pneumonia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In addition to being a story about the friendship and rivalry between Nel and Sula, *Sula* can be read as a story about the African-American experience in the first half of the 20th century. As the novel begins, blacks in the United States live in a state of fear and poverty. African-Americans were freed from slavery following the Civil War, but their literal liberation didn't free them from other forms of economic servitude and social oppression. In practice, blacks had almost no legal or political power, meaning that they could be manipulated and controlled by racist whites with impunity. It was hoped that by serving in World War I, beginning in 1917, blacks could gain some political rights, but this largely turned out to be untrue: the American government of the period, headed by Woodrow Wilson, showed no interest in granting new legal and political protections for the black community, in spite of its loyal service to the U.S. during the war. Morrison alludes to African-Americans' thankless service in World War I via the character of Shadrack—a young, strong black man who fights in Europe, and returns to his home a broken man. Finally, Morrison's novel alludes to the economic history of the black community in the United States. In the 30s and 40s, blacks gained some legal rights for themselves, largely as a result of starting their own businesses and making more money. By 1965—the year in which the novel ends—there were more and more prosperous black families, but at the same time, black people remained highly discriminated against in America. While blacks had more money and rights than they ever had before, they were still largely pushed to live in poorer, segregated communities, far from whites.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Sula alludes to many works of American literature. One of its most overt allusions is to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Just as Hester Prynne wears a bright scarlet "A" on her chest and is despised by the hypocritical townspeople, so Sula's face is "dirtied" with a birthmark, and must face the hatred of the self-hating people of Medallion. The beginning of *Sula*, in which the narrator dryly notes that a once-thriving black community has been converted into a golf course, is an unmistakable shot at the first pages of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In this novel Faulkner studies the history of a decaying white Southern family, treating the family's decision to sell its old golf course as a tragic milestone. By beginning with an all-white golf course, Morrison seems to be criticizing Faulkner for focusing only on the decay of white culture in his portraits of the South—or at the very least, she suggests that she is now offering to tell the other side of the story. Morrison's novel has many touches that could be termed "magical realism" (though Morrison herself has denied this)—characters speak from the grave, live for decades without aging, etc. Magical realism, a literary movement that began in the 1950s in Latin America, aims to blur the divide between fantasy and reality: in a magical realist novel, the most fantastical events are described as if they're everyday occurrences. One of the most famous practitioners of magical realism was Gabriel Garcia Marquez, whose 1967 novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*—with its themes of time, aging, memory, and recurrence, as well as its blurring of fantasy and reality—seems to have been an important influence on Morrison. Finally, in *Sula*, one can see hints of the themes and storylines that Morrison would develop in later novels. For instance, the theme of names—names that tell a great, complicated story—is detectable within the first few pages of *Sula*. Morrison would later develop this theme in her 1977 novel *Song of Solomon*, in which the main character must journey across the country to learn the history of his own name.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:***Sula*
- **Where Written:**Washington D.C.
- **When Published:**November 1973

- **Literary Period:** 1970s Feminism, postmodernism, Magical Realism
- **Genre:** Generational saga, family drama
- **Setting:** Medallion, Ohio
- **Climax:** The mass death at the New River Road on January 3, 1941
- **Antagonist:** It's hard to pin down any definite antagonist in *Sula*: all the characters have their vices and virtues. However, one could certainly say that racism functions as a kind of general antagonist impacting all of the characters.
- **Point of View:** Third person limited—the novel is told from the perspectives of many different characters, including Nel, Sula, Eva, Shadrack, and Jude.

EXTRA CREDIT

Renaissance Woman: Toni Morrison isn't afraid to say that she's talented. When she appeared on The Colbert Report in 2014, she told Stephen Colbert that she'd recently re-read her 1987 masterpiece, *Beloved*. Her conclusion? It was "very, very good."

Awards, awards, awards: Morrison has won virtually every honor available for an American writer: the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, the American Book Award, etc. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. As of 2015, she is the most recent American, the only American woman, and the only African-American to win this honor.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel takes place in the neighborhood of Bottom, in the city of Medallion, Ohio—a place which, at present, is a golf course for rich white people, but which used to be a thriving black community. In the 1910s, there is a man living in the Bottom named Shadrack. In 1917, he goes off to fight in World War I. He witnesses great violence in Europe, and returns to the Bottom a broken man. Shadrack then proposes a holiday for the people of Bottom: **National Suicide Day**. Every year, he walks through the streets, ringing a bell and yelling. At first, the people of the Bottom ignore Shadrack, but eventually, National Suicide Day becomes an accepted part of the calendar.

Another resident of the Bottom is Helene Wright. Helene was born in New Orleans, and raised by her grandmother, who taught her to be pious and moral. As a young woman, she married Wiley Wright, a cook. Wright brought Helene to live in the Bottom, and together they had a daughter named Nel. Helene quickly acquired a reputation for being a highly respectable woman, and she raised her daughter to behave the same way. When Nel is a young girl, Helene takes her back to New Orleans to visit her grandmother Cecile (Nel's great-grandmother). On the train ride to New Orleans, a racist train conductor shouts at Helene, but Helene only responds by flashing him a dazzling smile. Nel notices that the black people sitting in the train are glaring at Helene for her deferential behavior. Nel resolves never to let any black man look at her this way. In New Orleans, Nel and Helene arrive too late—Cecile is already dead. Instead they briefly meet Rochelle, Helene's mother, who is a prostitute and shows no affection or concern for Helene or Nel.

Another resident of the Bottom in the early 1920s is Sula Peace, a girl with a strange **birthmark**, shaped like a stemmed rose, on her face. Sula lives in a house that's nearly the opposite of Nel's: big, chaotic, and full of people. Sula is largely raised by her grandmother, Eva Peace, an old, one-legged woman, and her mother, Hannah Peace. Eva was married to a man named BoyBoy, who left her after she'd given birth to three children: Hannah, Pearl, and Plum. Eva devoted herself to raising her children. One winter, she left town for months, and when she returned she had only one leg, but plenty of money. (It's rumored that Eva allowed a train to cut off her leg in order to collect an expensive insurance policy.) Eva's youngest child, Plum, went off to fight in World War I. When he returned, he was ragged-looking, and seemed to have become addicted to heroin. Overcome with grief and love for her child, Eva doused Plum with kerosene while he was sleeping and set him on **fire**, burning him alive. Hannah, Eva's eldest child, always sensed that Eva was responsible for Plum's death.

By 1922 Sula and Nel are twelve years old, and have become good friends. Sula protects Nel from bullies in the city, and they have a similar loneliness that makes them close. One day, Sula and Nel go down to the Ohio River to look for boys to flirt with. By the river, they find only Chicken Little, a young boy. Sula dares Chicken Little to climb a high tree with her. Reluctantly, Chicken Little follows Sula up the tree. Then they climb down, and Sula swings Chicken Little around by the hands as he laughs. Suddenly, as Nel watches, Sula's grip slips and Chicken Little flies out into the river. He disappears underwater and doesn't resurface.

Terrified that they've killed Chicken Little, Sula and Nel run for help, and to see if anyone witnessed the accident. The nearest house is a shack that belongs to Shadrack. Sula runs inside, where she finds Shadrack. Sula tries to ask Shadrack if he saw what happened on the river. Before she can finish, however, Shadrack says "Always"—which Sula interprets to mean that he *did* witness the accident. Sula runs out and Nel comforts her, noticing that Sula's belt is missing. A few days later, Chicken Little's body is found in the river. Sula and Nel feel guilty, and are frightened that they'll be punished for their role in the child's death.

In 1923, Hannah Peace is burned alive, for reasons that nobody can understand. In the days leading up to her death, she confronts Eva about killing Plum. Eva doesn't deny what she

did, but explains that she couldn't stand to see someone she loved so much in pain. A few days later, Eva sees Hannah standing outside the house, her dress on fire. Without hesitation, Eva pushes herself through the second-story window of her house (trying to protect Hannah) and falls to the ground below. Both Eva and Hannah are rushed to the hospital—Eva survives her fall, but Hannah doesn't survive her burns. Before she's taken off to the hospital, Eva notices Sula, quietly watching her own mother burn. Eva comes to hate Sula because of this.

In 1927, Nel marries a handsome man named Jude Greene. Greene is ambitious and dreams of working on the **New River Road**—the big road that, white contractors claim, will one day link the Bottom with communities nearby. At their wedding, Nel and Jude are deeply in love and can't wait to start a family. Following the wedding, Sula leaves the Bottom and doesn't come back for ten years. During this time, Jude and Nel have several children. Meanwhile Sula goes to college and travels to the great American cities, looking for love but only ever finding men who want to sleep with her.

When Sula returns to the Bottom in 1937, she goes to visit Eva Peace. Sula accuses Eva of cutting off her own leg to get an insurance policy. A few weeks later, Sula calls officials at a nearby nursing home, and they come to take Eva away. Sula reunites with Nel, who's still married to Jude, though she's not as happy as she used to be. Nel is overjoyed to be reunited with her old friend. When Sula greets Jude, Jude is immediately fascinated by her. Shortly thereafter, Jude begins an affair with Sula. One afternoon, Nel comes home to find Jude and Sula in bed. Jude tells Nel that he's leaving her, and within a few days he's left, without Sula, to live in Detroit. The people of the Bottom come to despise Sula—they know that she's slept with Jude and sent Eva away from her family.

In 1940, Sula becomes seriously ill. Nel, who hasn't seen Jude or Sula in years, decides to go see her old friend. Nel demands to know why Sula broke up Nel's marriage and destroyed their friendship. Sula responds that she's strong and independent—she can do whatever she wants. She also asks Nel, "If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" Furious, Nel leaves Sula, and Sula dies shortly thereafter.

After Sula's death, a frost comes to the Bottom, followed by a wave of disease. In January 1941, Shadrack walks through the streets, celebrating his annual National Suicide Day. He thinks back to long ago, when a young girl with a "tadpole" shaped mark (whom we know to be Sula) ran into his shack. He remembers taking the girl's belt and whispering "Always," meaning that the girl would be fine, in spite of her strange birthmark.

To Shadrack's surprise, dozens of people walk behind him, yelling and cheering for National Suicide Day. Together, they walk all the way to cliffs overlooking the river, where they survey the supposed "New River Road"—in reality, a dirty pile of bricks that'll never amount to anything. Disgusted with the hypocrisy of white businessmen, the people of the Bottom hurl stones at the road. Suddenly, a piece of the cliff breaks off, and dozens of people fall to their deaths in the river below.

In the final chapter of the book, set in 1965, Nel is a middle-aged woman. She goes to visit Eva Peace, who is still living in a nursing home. Eva asks Nel why she killed Chicken Little. Nel, shocked, insists that it was Sula, not she, who killed the boy. Nel runs outside the nursing home, where she sees a cemetery. She finds the graves of the Peace family, including Sula's grave. Nel realizes that she's missed Sula all these years, though she thought she'd been missing her husband. She cries out for her old friend, but no one can hear her.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sula Peace – The titular character of *Sula*, Sula Peace is a wild, resourceful woman, whose friendship with the tame and domestic Nel Wright changes in various complicated ways between the 1920s and the 1940s. From the time that she's young, it's clear that Sula is capable great acts of strength and bravery, and seems not to be frightened by even the most horrific sights (such as her mother, Hannah Peace, **burning** to death). Although Sula remains close friends with Nel for years, Sula begins to long for travel, and after Nel marries Jude Greene, Sula goes off to explore the country. Sula's disappointment with the "sameness" of America eventually leads her to sleep with Jude Greene himself, ruining Nel's marriage and the friendship between the two women. While the people of the Bottom tend to regard Sula simply as a "wicked woman," Morrison makes it clear that there's much more to her. Unloved by her family, Sula struggles to find an intimate connection with another human being, and refuses to embrace the self-loathing that the other people of the Bottom have come to celebrate. Though she arguably fails to do either of these things, it's telling that her final words (spoken, indeed, *after* her death) are about Nel—the woman whom she betrayed, but still loved.

Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene – One of the two protagonists of *Sula*, Nel Wright is an orderly, proper young woman who tries to find peace in the face of jealousy and sexual danger. Like her mother, Helene Wright, Nel believes in the importance of virtue and following the rules. When, as a young child, she befriends Sula Peace, a girl who's as wild and unpredictable as Nel is proper, Nel secretly fears and resents Sula's vivaciousness, and even smiles when Sula accidentally kills a young child, Chicken Little. In spite of her love for rules, Nel is capable of great feats of empathy—for instance, she comes to understand Eva Peace when no one else in the

Bottom will do so. In the end, however, Nel finds herself alone in the world—she gives up on Sula and Eva, and tries unsuccessfully to find a new husband. Only when it's too late does she realize that she should have ignored her instinct to remarry, and instead stayed close with Sula, her oldest and best friend.

Shadrack – A prematurely aged, fearsome-looking, and often incoherent resident of the Bottom. Shadrack was once a young, handsome man, but his experiences fighting in World War I left him with deep emotional scars. For the majority of the novel, Shadrack is something of a hermit—living in an abandoned shack near the Ohio River, and fishing to feed himself. Shadrack leads an annual celebration, **National Suicide Day**, which symbolizes his despair and self-hatred. Yet he's also capable of acts of surprising tenderness and understanding. Unfortunately, the people of the Bottom tend to misinterpret these acts as spiteful or unkind—because of one such interpretation (of the word "always"), Sula Peace and Nel Wright begin to grow apart, setting in motion most of the events of the novel.

Helene Sabat Wright – Helene Sabat is a proud, pious woman who was born in New Orleans, and later moved to Medallion, Ohio to marry Wiley Wright, her cousin. Helene was born in a whorehouse in New Orleans, but she was raised by her grandmother to be good and proper in all ways. Helene demands control over every part of her life—a quality she passes down to her child, Nel Wright. Like most of the other characters in *Sula*, Helene struggles to make sense of her painful, traumatic life—goodness and piety are ways for her to "take control" and stave off her own misery.

Eva Peace – The elderly matriarch of the Peace family, Eva Peace is an impressive, capable, and fiercely devoted mother and grandmother. As a young woman, she marries BoyBoy, but after BoyBoy leaves her, she throws herself into the task of raising her three children, Plum, Pearl, and Hannah. On many occasions, Eva is shown to be willing to sacrifice her own health and happiness to ensure the survival of her children—indeed, it's suggested that she cuts off her own leg in order to collect an expensive insurance policy, and spends the rest of her life in a wheelchair. Eva is highly admired in the Bottom, and is given the important task of naming babies. In spite of her capacity to help and care for others, Eva is also capable of acts of great cruelty and spite, and some acts that could be interpreted as cruel or spiteful. When her youngest and seemingly favorite child, Plum, returns from World War I with a heroin addiction, Eva **burns** him alive rather than see him live his life in pain. Later, when she's nearly 90 years old, Eva is sent to live in a retirement home, where she spends the rest of her days at first remembering, but then slowly forgetting, her own long life.

Hannah Peace – The oldest child of Eva Peace, Hannah Peace is an important influence on her daughter, Sula Peace. After the death of her husband, Rekus, Hannah has many suitors, and often has sex with them while Sula is in the house. While Hannah is a devoted mother, she seems not to feel any love for her daughter—a fact that Sula quickly becomes aware of. Hannah struggles to understand her mother, Eva, and after Eva kills Plum in his sleep, it's suggested that their relationship never recovers. Hannah dies under mysterious circumstances that Morrison never fully explains: she's **burned** alive as Sula watches. Her unusual behavior and sexual promiscuity make a lasting impression on Sula.

Grandmother / Great-Aunt Cecile – The grandmother (and effective mother) of Helene Sabat Wright, and a great aunt to Wiley Wright, who eventually marries Helene. Great-Aunt Cecile, like her granddaughter, is a proper, righteous woman who recognizes the importance of religion and good behavior. She dies before the age of 50—a tragic reminder of the harsh lives Morrison's characters lead.

Wiley Wright – The husband of Helene Sabat Wright, and the great-nephew of Cecile, Wiley Wright is barely present in *Sula*—a surprising fact, considering that he's the father of one of the novel's protagonists. Wiley is a cook on a ship, meaning that he's often out of the house for long periods of time. Helene, with her desire for total control over her house and life, prefers to be married to a man with a busy schedule. After the second chapter of the novel, Wiley is barely mentioned again.

Rochelle – Helene's mother and Cecile's daughter. Rochelle is described as a "Creole whore" who works in a brothel called the "Sundown House." Rochelle, who's 48 when she meets her granddaughter, Nel Wright, seems to have no concern or affection for her daughter, and only briefly appears at Cecile's house after her death.

Tar Baby – A pale-skinned resident of the Bottom, rumored to be either partly or entirely white. Tar Baby is a depressed, self-hating man, who's among the first to join Shadrack in "celebration" of **National Suicide Day**. It's rumored that Tar Baby has come to the Bottom to drink himself to death. He's despised by many of the residents of Medallion, both in and outside of the Bottom: the general belief is that a white man shouldn't be mixing with blacks, whether or not he's depressed.

BoyBoy Peace – The neglectful, often brutish husband of Eva Peace. BoyBoy marries Eva when she's still very young, and is a loving, happy husband at first. But after Eva gives birth to three children, BoyBoy abruptly abandons his family, leaving Eva behind to take care of the children. BoyBoy returns to the Bottom several years later, finds Eva confidently raising her family, and then leaves once again, never to return. While he's not mentioned many times in *Sula*, BoyBoy is one of the novel's most important characters—we can sense that if he hadn't left his family, Eva wouldn't have become the woman she is.

Ralph / Plum Peace – The youngest and seemingly best loved of Eva Peace's three children, Plum Peace goes off to fight in World War I, and, like Shadrack, comes back a broken man. He

spends a year traveling through the biggest American cities, and, it's implied, develops a heroin habit in the process. Eva Peace, overcome with grief at her favorite child's pain and misery, decides to "mercifully" kill Plum by **burning** him alive—one of the central events of the novel.

Ajax – One of the most enigmatic characters in *Sula*, Ajax is a young, energetic resident of the Bottom, who seems to be a brutish, sexist man, but also proves to have a sensitive, mysterious side. It is Ajax who catcalls to Nel Wright and Sula Peace when they're still young girls, and years later, Ajax begins an affair with Sula. We learn that Ajax is unique in the Bottom, because his mother was a mysterious, theatrical woman who practiced witchcraft: as a result, Ajax has always been good at talking to women, and shows genuine interest in their thoughts and feelings. While these qualities attract Sula to Ajax at first, it's strongly implied that their relationship ends when Ajax gives in to his desire for independence, and leaves the Bottom.

Jude Greene – A young, handsome resident of the Bottom, who dreams of spending his adulthood working on the famed **New River Road**, Jude is one of the strangest characters in *Sula*: although he seems like a kind, respectable man, he's also capable of acts of callous cruelty that ruin the lives of people he claims to love. For ten years, Jude is a loving husband to his wife, Nel Wright, but when Sula Peace returns to the Bottom in 1937, Jude begins an affair with Sula almost immediately. Soon afterwards, Jude leaves the Bottom forever and goes to live in Detroit, where he's never heard from again. His abrupt departure from his home throws Nel's life into chaos.

The deweys – A group of boys who are given the same name by Eva Peace when they're born: "Dewey." Over time, the deweys (always lowercase!) remain a tight-knit group, to the point where they refuse to do anything alone. Despite the fact that the deweys are all different ages, they're treated as one unit by the people of the Bottom: the deweys are sent to school at the same time, and when one dewey is bad, they're all punished equally. In a touch of magical realism, the deweys do not age physically. It's as if their refusal to be individuals—only a group—means that they cannot develop and become adults. As a result, they're children for the rest of their lives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Henri Martin – A New Orleans resident and friend of Great-Aunt Cecile, who alerts Helene Sabat Wright to her grandmother's sickness.

Rekus – The husband of Hannah Peace, who dies when Sula Peace, his daughter, is three years old.

Eva / Pearl Peace – The middle of Eva Peace's three children, and one about whom we know the least. Pearl marries a man at the age of 14, and moves to Michigan—afterwards, we hear little about her. Ohio, it seems, is only big enough for one "Eva Peace."

Patsy – A friend of Hannah Peace.

Valentine – A friend of Hannah Peace.

Chicken Little – A young boy who plays with Sula Peace and Nel Wright, and, due in part to Sula's clumsiness, falls into the Ohio River and drowns.

Reverend Deal – The head of the church in the Bottom.

Old Willy Fields – An orderly at the local hospital who saves Eva Peace's life after she hurls herself out of a window.

Teapot – A young child whose parents beat him when he's misbehaved, but stop when Sula returns to the Bottom in 1937.

Mr. Finley – An old man whose death from a chicken bone is blamed on Sula Peace.

Dessie – A woman who lives in the Bottom.

Mr. Suggs – A neighbor of Eva Peace.

Mrs. Suggs – A neighbor of Eva Peace.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE AND RACISM

Like most of Toni Morrison's novels, *Sula* studies the ways that black people struggle to live in America, a country with a notorious history of persecuting and oppressing black people.

Black characters in the novel face the weight of a history in which white Americans have consistently swindled blacks out of their property and their rights by manipulating laws, social norms, and even language itself. In the city of Medallion, where the novel is set, African-Americans have traditionally been confined to the Bottom—ironically the area with the highest altitude, and the least desirable neighborhood of the city. Whites promised blacks land on the "bottom"—meaning, seemingly land that was close to the Ohio River—then backed out of their promise by giving away land in the hills, supposedly the "bottom" of heaven. As the novel goes on, we see a more of this white manipulation of the African-American community, but becoming more and more sly. By the end of the book, it's clear that whites have been systematically denying blacks in the Bottom their health care and heating, always saying that the extra resources will be used to pay for a supposed **New River Road**—a public works project that simply doesn't exist. While there are almost no white characters in the book, the novel shows how the white establishment—often referred to simply as "they"—has used trickery (backed up by the cynical

understanding that blacks have no legal representation, and thus can't argue their position) to keep blacks as poor and as far from white communities as possible. "They" also try to keep blacks naïve and optimistic: always chasing for goals (such as the New River Road) that they'll never attain.

In response to the racism they face, many of the blacks who live in the Bottom regard white culture with hatred. But because of the way white culture has shaped society, black people in the novel have no other concrete standard for beauty and sophistication other than whiteness. In this way (and despite the fact that the white establishment in Ohio clearly wants to keep them far away), many of the black characters in the Bottom are desperate to join the white community. Characters straighten their hair and painfully twist their own noses in an attempt to "look white." Eventually, some blacks in the community gain enough money and power to move to white neighborhoods of Medallion. And yet when this does happen, these white communities move away, keeping the city of Medallion segregated. Blacks' desire to join white communities comes to seem like another naïve, unreachable goal—just like the New River Road.

It's crucial to understand the role of race and racism in *Sula*. The characters in the novel, almost all of whom are black, have been trained to think of themselves as second-class citizens, to hate their lot in life, and—in some cases—to hate each other for being black. By writing *Sula*, a book about the African-American experience in the 20th century, Morrison studies how a group strives for improvement in a society that's been constructed to make this improvement impossible—a theme that's relevant to readers of all races.

LOVE AND SEXUALITY

One of the biggest challenges of reading *Sula* is to understand how the characters can do things that, on the surface, appear cruel, even as they claim to be acting out of love.

At times, the character's love for one another drives them to hurt and even kill each other. There's no better example of this than Eva Peace's act of "loving murder." She's always loved her youngest child, Ralph "Plum" Peace, and nearly killed herself trying to raise him through long winters. When Plum returns from World War I with a strong drug addiction, Eva can't stand to see her beloved child losing his mind. She douses him in kerosene and lights him on **fire**, confident that she's putting him out of the miseries of addiction and war trauma. Even now that Plum is fully-grown, Eva can't picture herself allowing him to live his life without her help. Because Eva the loyal mother can no longer take care of Plum, she "takes care" of him and ends his life.

Morrison doesn't fully "explain" Eva's actions (even the explanation Eva herself gives can't convey all the intricate reasons for why she did what she did). After a certain point, love is so complicated that we'll never be able to understand why people do what they do, and Eva's attack is the central example of this. Nevertheless, Morrison tries to help us understand her characters' interpretations of love by studying a closely related subject: their sexuality.

Of the two protagonists, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, Nel has been raised to regard sexuality as a sacred, essential part of becoming an adult and a wife. Sula's interpretation of sex is different: sex has been an uncontroversial, casual part of her life since she was a child. But as different as these two interpretations of sexuality may be, both Nel and Wright try to use sexuality to foster love. Both characters are taught to pursue sex with men, beginning at least when they're twelve years old. For the young girls, sexuality is indistinguishable from *being*—it's just that Nel thinks sexuality should be confined to marriage, while Sula thinks it shouldn't. Unsurprisingly, when Sula is much older, she's still trying to use sex to forge meaningful connections with men—indeed, she travels around America, having affairs and trying to find someone to love. After many years, Sula sleeps with Jude Greene, Nel's own husband. Sula loves Nel Wright: she's defended Nel from bullies, cheered Nel up when she's sad, celebrated Nel's wedding, etc. Yet because she's been raised to think of sexuality as both uncontroversial and extremely important, Sula winds up hurting Nel, the person she loves most.

In *Sula* (and in real life), love is almost impossible to define. Partly because it's hard to understand, and partly because they've been raised in a hyper-sexualized community, the female characters of the Bottom try to come to grips with love by reducing it to something else: sex with a man. In a way, the tragedy of *Sula* is that Nel and Sula, faced with a world in which love seems strange and indecipherable, try to find love through sexuality, and in doing so give up on the purest and most important form of love in their lives: their love for each other.

The great advantage of the process of "identity formation" for the people of the Bottom is that it gives them a strong sense of community. Even if they're all miserable, they're miserable together: united in their acceptance of pain. When a character like Sula Peace arrives in the Bottom, clearly unwilling to accept tragedy in her own life, we see the strength of the Bottom community. The townspeople join together in hating Sula for daring to "be" another way, a hatred that lessens their own self-hatred. But the great weakness of the townspeople's identity is obvious: they're accepting that they're doomed to be persecuted and have no reason to try to better their lives. Toni Morrison is fond of saying that she uses her writing to argue for an idea, and then show why that idea is wrong. In typical form, Morrison uses *Sula* to show how the townspeople's miserable process of identity formation makes their lives more bearable, and yet also condemns them to further misery.

SUFFERING AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison examines how the people in the Bottom, most of whom are poor, have been sick, or have lost loved ones prematurely, make sense of their own tragic lives and family histories. One of the most important ways that the people of Bottom cope with tragedy is by developing an identity for themselves, and creating an identity for their community.

The townspeople's identity as a community is founded on tragedy. There is plenty of this to go around: the Bottom itself is founded on whites' cynical swindling of African-Americans, and in 1917, dozens of black men in the community are sent off to fight in World War I—a dangerous job that requires these men to die defending their country, yet results in no new rights or respect for the African-Americans who manage to survive. One by one, each of the characters in the book feels a sense of profound helplessness: a sense that no matter how hard they try, they'll always be ridiculed, treated as inferior, and forced to live in poverty and misery.

Surrounded by misery, the people of the Bottom come to accept a pessimistic outlook on life. The characters come to regard their own lives as painful, misshapen things—they couldn't imagine living any other way. Paradoxically, acknowledging this fact creates a sense of peace and security—even if it's impossible to make things better, at least it's possible to *accept* things. After that, it's possible to make light of one's own tragedy: with music, dance, prayer, or humor. This is precisely the purpose of the annual ritual that Shadrack (a World War I veteran) begins. By accepting **National Suicide Day**, Shadrack, and later the other townspeople, accept their own fear, depression, and self-hatred— they can try to process it, and even make light of it, by partitioning it off into one day of the year.

WOMEN, MOTHERHOOD, AND GENDER ROLES

Although *Sula* moves between many different characters' perspectives, it is almost entirely told from the point of view of women living in the Bottom. Often, the men in the novel can't be "pinned down" for long: their jobs keep them away from home (Wiley Wright), or their desire for independence leads them to abandon their families (Jude Greene, BoyBoy, etc.). As a result, it's no surprise that Morrison offers many insights into the lives of women and their role in their communities.

One quality that defines many of the women in *Sula* (Helene, Eva, Hannah, Nel, etc.) is motherhood. The men in the novel are often less closely connected with their families than are their wives—sometimes, they abandon their families altogether. Although many of the mothers in the novel leave their hometown in Ohio for long periods of time (even Eva Peace, perhaps the most devoted mother in the book, leaves for eighteen months), they're likely to come back to take care of their children, and often after they take one leave of absence, they never take another one again. As a result of the heightened presence of mothers in the lives of their children, the bond between a mother and child—and particularly a mother and her daughter—is exceptionally strong.

Another important kind of feminine bond in *Sula*, arguably even more important than motherhood, is friendship—the paramount example being the close friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright. And yet there's always an implicit problem in the friendships between women and other women. Too often, women—certainly the women of the Bottom—are taught that they must find a husband, or else always be "incomplete." We can see this dynamic at work when Sula and Nel, only twelve years old, go off to find "beautiful boys"—an episode of their lives that ultimately drives them apart and spoils their friendship. Years later, Sula, convinced that she must find love and understanding through sex, sleeps with Nel's husband, Jude Green, destroying Nel's marriage and ending their friendship for good. When women are convinced that finding a man is their ultimate purpose in life, they will consider their friendships with other women to be only of secondary importance—and as a result, female friendships face the danger of being torn apart by competition for "beautiful boys."

In a famous essay, the author Virginia Woolf praised Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night* for being the first work of Western literature in which two women are friends with one another, and don't compete for a man's attention. It's worth thinking about how rare friendships between women are in literature—more often than not, women's relationships are defined by a common goal: a husband. In *Sula*, Morrison shows how the relationships between women hold families and entire communities together. And yet many female friendships are ruined because society teaches women that their purpose in life is to compete for a husband and make a *new* family.

SIGNS, NAMES, AND INTERPRETATION

From the first pages of *Sula*, it's clear that signs and names carry a huge amount of power. The novel documents some of the ways that signs can be powerful, and how this power can be used and abused.

Morrison makes it clear that the act of naming is enormously important, and always reflects the power and personality of the "namer." For example, throughout the novel various characters are given the opportunity to "name" one important and ambiguous sign: Sula Peace's oddly shaped **birthmark**. Each character gives a different "name" to the birthmark, and the names could be said to reflect the character's innermost thoughts and behaviors. Jude Greene thinks the birthmark

looks like a snake, perhaps reflecting his sexual desire for Sula, while Shadrack thinks the mark looks like a tadpole, symbolizing his fishing and his infantile mind. In short, names are never accidents: ironically, they always say something about who's doing the naming.

But even if names reflect the namer's own thoughts and desires, the name he or she chooses also exerts real, tangible power over the thing being named. Eva Peace, who's tasked with naming every child in the Bottom, gives a group of children the same name: Dewey. Over time, the children continue spending time with each other, even though they're all different ages. The name becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: because Eva gives the children the same name, they remain bound together for the rest of their lives.

There's no doubt that naming is an important form of power in *Sula*. And yet this power can be twisted and manipulated for selfish reasons. The racist white farmers who trick their black field workers into accepting land in the hills overlooking Medallion have manipulated a name—"Bottom"—for their own advantages. The farmers, knowing full well what they're doing, have promised African-Americans one thing, then given them another, because the ambiguity in the name "Bottom" allows them this leeway. This is *why* naming is so difficult, and so prone to deception: because not everyone can agree on what something means, one particular interpretation is always in danger of disagreeing with the other interpretations.

In the end, the tragedy of *Sula* is a tragedy of ambiguous signs, whose definitions and meanings can never be agreed upon. When Sula accidentally kills Chicken Little, she thinks that Shadrack has seen her, and is silently judging her for her crime. When Sula runs into Shadrack's shack, Shadrack whispers the word "always" to her, seemingly a sign that he is "always" watching, and knows about Sula's crime. The truth, which only Shadrack and we, the readers, know, is that Shadrack is actually trying to comfort Sula about her birthmark—he didn't even know that Chicken Little was drowned. One word, interpreted one way, has scarred Sula for the rest of her life. Because the people in the novel interpret different names in different ways—"always," "husband," "friend," "love"—they must live in a state of uncertainty, never sure if their loved ones can truly understand them.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BIRTHMARK

Sula Peace's most obvious physical characteristic is the large **birthmark** immediately above her eyes. The birthmark is intimidating and even frightening, and inspires many elaborate stories among the people of the Bottom. Yet it's also exotic and enticing, especially the way that it grows steadily darker as Sula gets older. It seems that Sula's ever-darkening birthmark is a symbol of her age, maturity, and growing sadness—the very things she's trying so hard to fight against. At the same time, Morrison claims that the birthmark resembles a "stemmed rose"—an image that is both feminine (the flower) and masculine (the long phallic stem). This points to Sula's androgynous qualities: she's a woman who desires the independence and freedom of a man. Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that the birthmark symbolizes whatever we conceive it to represent. Each character in *Sula* provides a different interpretation of the birthmark: Sula's admirers think it looks like a snake, Shadrack the fisherman think it looks like a tadpole, etc. The birthmark is like a Rorschach inkblot test, revealing more about the interpreter than about Sula herself.

FIRE

Fire figures prominently in *Sula*—in arguably the two most important scenes in the book, the death of Hannah Peace and the death of Plum Peace, fire "removes" a character from the story. Fire is a powerful destructive force, capable of ending life, and yet it is also undeniably beautiful: Morrison's descriptions of the flames engulfing Hannah and Plum are among the most gorgeous passages in the novel. Furthermore, fire could even be considered *kind*. Eva Peace makes the decision to end Plum's life because Plum seems to be suffering deeply: only fire can bring his life to a clean, merciful end. Fire, in all its ambiguities, could be said to symbolize life itself: life is both cruel and kind, and can't be simplified to either emotion. And fire could also be said to symbolize Sula Peace—simultaneously the most vicious and the gentlest character in the book.

THE PLAGUE OF ROBINS

When Sula Peace returns to the Bottom in 1937, she's followed by a large flock of birds—Morrison describes it as a "**plague of robins**." Morrison is being a little ironic: she knows perfectly well that birds don't fly in "plagues." Rather, Morrison is capturing Sula's return from the *perspective* of the small-minded townspeople, who distrust Sula because of her energy and livelihood. As Sula spends more and more time in the town, the people think of other ambiguous signs that supposedly "prove" that Sula is wicked. And yet the plague of robins is the most important of these ambiguous signs, because it can so clearly be interpreted positively or negatively. There's nothing particularly frightening or threatening about a flock of birds—unless you call it a "plague." In this sense, the plague of robins is a symbol of symbol—that is, it's a symbol for the way that narrow-minded people can easily misinterpret the world

to fit into their biased opinions.

THE NEW RIVER ROAD

In the 1930s, a new "public works" project is proposed in Medallion, Ohio: a road that will connect the black neighborhood of the Bottom with some of the surrounding white communities. While it's not explicitly stated, Morrison implies that this project is a product of Roosevelt's New Deal, implying an agreement between the federal government and more overtly racist government agencies of the state of Ohio. It's not until the end of *Sula* that the "**New River Road**" is shown for what it really is. More than a decade after the road was proposed, it's still not finished. Whenever the local authorities deny healthcare to the blacks in the Bottom, or charge extra rent, the stated reason is always the same: it's a sacrifice, necessary for the completion of the road, which will benefit everyone—including the black people in the Bottom—equally. But when the residents of the Bottom march to the New River Road, they see the reality of it: a dirty pile of bricks that will never be finished. In all, the road is a tragic symbol of the deception and manipulation that American authorities have used to prolong black suffering.

NATIONAL SUICIDE DAY

After returning from the devastation of World War I, Shadrack founds a new "holiday"—**National Suicide Day**. On this day, he walks through the streets of Medallion, ringing a bell and yelling about suicide. Although the people of the Bottom initially sneer at Shadrack for celebrating in this way, National Suicide Day eventually becomes an accepted part of their lives: it's just another day of the year, like Thanksgiving or the 4th of July. National Suicide Day is a disturbing symbol for the way that suffering people come to accept their own suffering—to take it as a law of nature. The danger of this kind of acceptance—seemingly a useful coping mechanism—is that miserable people, in this case the black people of the Bottom, can come to *celebrate* as well as accept their suffering. This becomes the case in the 1940s, when life in Ohio deteriorates, and the people of the Bottom begin to embrace their own pain, parading through the streets and singing about suicide—a parade that ironically ends in several deaths.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage International edition of *Sula* published in 2004.

Prologue Quotes

Freedom was easy--the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile." "But it's high up in the hills," said the slave. "High up from us," said the master, "but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is." So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some. He preferred it to the valley. And it was done. The nigger got the hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the Prologue, Morrison describes the Bottom, a black community in which the rest of the story takes place. There is a legend about how the area got its name: years before, when the slaves were first being freed, their white owners would promise them "Bottom land," which the slaves assumed meant the good, fertile land in the valley. Later, the slave masters would give their former slaves the arid, useless land high up in the hills--land that was supposedly close to the "bottom of Heaven." In other words, white people used linguistic tricks to force uneducated black people into an inferior position.

The passage is notable because it establishes the importance of names and language for the characters. Powerful characters in the book are shown to have a strong proficiency with language--often, they demonstrate their power by naming babies, or interpreting a complicated word or sign. Controlling language becomes particularly importance, the passage shows, because of the preeminence of racism in the community. White people want to keep black people subjugated, even after the slaves are freed--and controlling *words* is a way for them to do so. But, as Morrison shows, words are also a way for black people to fight back and affirm their dignity and creativity.

1919 Quotes

There in the toilet water he saw a grave black face. A black so definite, so unequivocal, it astonished him. He had been harboring a skittish apprehension that he was not real—that he didn't exist at all. But when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more. In his joy he took the risk of letting one edge of the blanket drop and glanced at his hands. They were still. Courteously still. Shadrack rose and returned to the cot, where he fell into the first sleep of his new life.

Related Characters: Shadrack

Related Themes:

Page Number: 13-14

Explanation and Analysis

Shadrack, a black veteran of World War One, sees his own face in a toilet bowl. He's been deeply disturbed by what he witnessed in the war, probably has PTSD because of it, and wishes he could forget about it altogether. Here, we see Shadrack coping with his own trauma. By gazing at his reflection, Shadrack finds a way to stabilize his anxieties--he keeps coming back to fact that he is Shadrack, and always will be. Notably, he also finds comfort and stability in his blackness. Unlike the racist society he lives in, in this passage Shadrack sees that there is nothing inherently inferior about blackness--in fact it is a color of calm, beauty, and power.

At the same time, of course, Shadrack isn't really looking at himself as he really is: he's looking at himself in a toilet. Shadrack is coming to accept a lesser version of himself, a version that's been tarnished and dirtied both by the savagery of war and the cruelty of U.S. racism. In order to maintain his sanity, he accepts his new "self," but in doing so he also accepts his status as a second-class citizen and an inferior human being. Shadrack's behavior in this passage is the first of many scenes of self-acceptance, in which a character will accept an inferior position in society out of weakness, fear, or sheer exhaustion.

Then Reverend Deal took it up, saying the same folks who had sense enough to avoid Shadrack's call were the ones who insisted on drinking themselves to death or womanizing themselves to death. "May's well go on with Shad and save the Lamb the trouble of redemption." Easily, quietly, Suicide Day became a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio.

Related Characters: Reverend Deal (speaker), Shadrack

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

When Shadrack returns to his town, he begins to celebrate a gruesome, made-up holiday called National Suicide Day. On this day, Shadrack walks through the streets, yelling about suicide for all to hear. Although the townspeople are at first shocked by Shadrack's calls for self-slaughter, they eventually begin to accept it, in a grudging, sarcastic way. Here, for example, we see a pillar of the community, the Reverend Deal, joking about how there are many in his community who *do* practice suicide--albeit the slow, painful suicide of alcoholism or other self-destructive behaviors.

It's crucial to notice that Reverend Deal, though he claims to be joking, is actually being perfectly serious. The townspeople want to dismiss Shadrack's actions as foolish and trivial, but their own lives are so miserable that they secretly sympathize with Shadrack's behavior. Over time, the townspeople will come to accept National Suicide Day as an ordinary part of their calendar--a brief but powerful reminder of the misery in their own lives (paralleling Shadrack's cynical acceptance of his reflection in the toilet bowl, discussed above).

1920 Quotes

He was a seaman (or rather a lakeman, for he was a ship's cook on one of the Great Lakes lines), in port only three days out of every sixteen. He took his bride to his home in Medallion and put her in a lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window. His long absences were quite bearable for Helene Wright, especially when, after some nine years of marriage, her daughter was born. Her daughter was more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life.

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene, Wiley Wright, Helene Sabat Wright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, we meet Helene Wright and her husband, Wiley Wright. Helene marries Wiley when she's still a young woman, despite (or really, *because* of) the fact that Wiley is a sailor, and spends all his time sailing around the Great Lakes. Helene seems not to want much contact with a man--perhaps because she's had so much experience as a child with male aggression and sexuality (she was born in a brothel), or perhaps because she just prefers to be alone and independent. So it suits her fine to marry a man who's never home.

It's worth asking why Helene bothers to marry anyone--if she's disgusted with men, why bother? In the unstable, racist society of the 1920s, Helene knows that she needs a man to support and protect her; she also wants the approval and attention of her peers. In general, though, the passage makes it clear that we're going to be reading a novel about women, first and foremost: the men in the novel (with one or two major exceptions) are largely peripheral to the plot.

❝ It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard—always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly.

Related Characters: Helene Sabat Wright, Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Here we get our first insight into the mind of Nel Wright, the troubled daughter of Helene Wright. Nel is only a small child when Helene takes her to the American South to visit her childhood home in Louisiana. On the train, Nel watches as Helene is accosted by a white man, who bullies her. Helene tries her best to cooperate with the man, and smiles deferentially at him--but then she faces the clear contempt of the black men on the train.

Even as a young girl, Nel feels a strange mixture of pity and contempt for her mother—Nel swears to herself that she'll never allow men to treat her that way; to make her feel submissive and helpless. The passage is also important because it establishes an antagonistic relationship between men and women, in and out of the black community. Furthermore, it suggests that coming of age—here represented by Nel's promise to herself—consists of the moment in which one becomes conscious of sex and sexual politics.

1921 Quotes

❝ Slowly each boy came out of whatever cocoon he was in at the time his mother or somebody gave him away, and accepted Eva's view, becoming in fact as well as in name a dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name... inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves. When the handle from the icebox fell off, all the deweys got whipped, and in dry-eyed silence watched their own feet as they turned their behinds high up into the air for the stroke.

Related Characters: Eva Peace, The deweys

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage—a good example of Morrison's style of magical realism—we're introduced to the deweys, a group of children. When they're young, the children are all given the same name, Dewey. Over time, the name "Dewey" itself becomes a literal, powerful bond between the boys—they do everything together, simply because of their common name. Even when one of the Dewey children is punished, the other boys accept the punishment, too. Strangest of all, the deweys stop growing—after a certain point, they never get any bigger or taller. Morrison conveys the unity of the children by spelling their common name in the lowercase—"deweys," not "Dewey."

There are a couple of key points here. First, note that Morrison never presents the peculiar solidarity of the deweys as magical or supernatural, even though it seems to be—as in many works of "magical realism" (the literary style with which Morrison is often associated), supernatural events are presented as perfectly ordinary. Second, notice that the deweys lack any individual identity. Each dewey child is exactly the same—they're even punished for the same crimes. Perhaps Morrison intends the deweys to be a symbol for the struggle for individualism in the black community. Persecuted by white America and brought up in poverty and misery, it's easier for the deweys to be a group than for them to be individuals—they're so frightened that they can't help losing their identities.

He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him. Some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep. Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. Quickly, as the whoosh of flames engulfed him, she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house.

Related Characters: Eva Peace, Ralph / Plum Peace

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Ralph "Plum" Peace, the child of Eva Peace, dies. Plum was Eva Peace's favorite son, and a bright, happy child. But after fighting in the American military, Plum becomes a shadow of his former self—he develops an addiction to heroine, and when he returns to Eva's house, he spends all his time alone in his room, quiet and depressed. Eva makes the agonizing decision to mercy-kill her beloved child, dousing him with kerosene and then lighting him on fire. Notice the way that Morrison conveys the pain and devastation of the scene. When Morrison describes Eva's "long, painful" journey back to her room, we're ironically reminded of Plum's painful death, and of Eva's agonizing decision to kill someone she loves—a decision that will haunt her for the rest of her life. Also notice that Morrison describes Plum's death in language that suggests birth, not death—his death is a "Baptism," whereby Plum is born again and freed from the pain and trauma of his life. So even as Morrison conveys the pain of the scene, she also suggests that Eva's decision to kill Plum is (mostly) merciful, not cruel.

1922 Quotes

Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose. It gave her otherwise plain face a broken excitement and blue-blade threat like the keloid scar of the razored man who sometimes played checkers with her grandmother. The birthmark was to grow darker as the years passed, but now it was the same shade as her gold-flecked eyes, which, to the end, were as steady and clean as rain.

Related Characters: Sula Peace

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

Here we're introduced to one of the most evocative symbols in the novel: Sula's mysterious birthmark. As we're told, Sula was born with a strange mark above her eye—a mark that gets darker over time, symbolizing Sula's literal and emotional aging. The birthmark is shaped like a rose with a stem—a shape which, as many critics have pointed out, is both masculine and feminine (the stem could be interpreted as phallic, while the rose is traditionally feminine). In other words, Sula's birthmark is a sign of her androgynous nature—she embodies both male and female characteristics, as we'll see very soon. We should also notice that for the time being, the birthmark is pale, reflecting the fact that Sula is still young, and—more importantly—still innocent. As Sula grows older and more sinful, her mark will dark accordingly—it's a kind of "benchmark" of her soul's state. (For more on the birthmark, see Symbols.)

Four white boys in their early teens, sons of some newly arrived Irish people, occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing black schoolchildren. With shoes that pinched and woolen knickers that made red rings on their calves, they had come to this valley with their parents believing as they did that it was a promised land—green and shimmering with welcome. What they found was a strange accent, a pervasive fear of their religion and firm resistance to their attempts to find work. [...] In part their place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old residents' attitude toward blacks.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Morrison describes the way that the Irish community in the novel bullies the black community. As we're told, there's a small community of Irish people who live near the Bottom. The white, native-born American community denies the Irish employment, spits on them, and generally treats them like second-class citizens—in other words, treats them almost as badly as they treat black people. And yet instead of befriending blacks, the Irish bully them just as much—in fact, more—than white Americans do.

The tragic irony of the passage is that even though the Irish have a lot more in common with black people than they do with native-born white Americans, they try to ingratiate themselves with white Americans by persecuting blacks. In a broader sense, the tragedy of the passage is that while many minorities face similar struggles, it's often human nature to turn on one other rather than unite against a common oppressor. The white Irish are considered inferior to the white Americans, but they feel that they can at least maintain a decent place in the hierarchy of society by emphasizing their superiority to black Americans.

❝ He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come. He nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in a pleasant conversational tone, a tone of cooled butter, "Always." Sula fled down the steps, and shot through the greenness and the baking sun back to Nel and the dark closed place in the water. There she collapsed in tears. Nel quieted her. "Sh, sh. Don't, don't. You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, le's go, Sula. Come on, now. Was he there? Did he see? Where's the belt to your dress?"

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene, Shadrack (speaker), Chicken Little, Sula Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62-63

Explanation and Analysis

In this crucial section, Sula crosses paths with Shadrack, the World War One veteran who now lives in a cabin and fishes all day long. Sula, along with her friend Nel, has just witnessed the death by drowning of a young boy named Chicken Little. Sula feels enormously guilty for what she's done—she feels that she's responsible for a child's death. Sula staggers into Shadrack's cabin, where she's shocked to see Shadrack smiling knowingly. Although Sula doesn't ask Shadrack for details, she's surprised to hear him say, "Always"—a word that, in her mind, proves that he's been watching her, and knows she was partly responsible for Chicken Little's death.

This is one of the most important moments of the novel, and yet it's impossible to understand fully—at least right now. The scene has a strange, elliptical quality—there's even a sexual element, symbolized by Nel's question, "Where's the belt to your dress?" (Given what Morrison has let us know, it's not difficult to imagine Shadrack attempting to sexually molest Sula.) For the time being, however, we should recognize that a single word—"Always"—changes Sula's life. The word makes her believe that she's always watched, and always guilty.

1923 Quotes

❝ "There wasn'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. He was growed, a big old thing. Godhavemercy, I couldn't birth him twice."

Related Characters: Eva Peace (speaker), Hannah Peace, Ralph / Plum Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

Here Eva Peace tries to explain to Hannah why she killed Plum, her favorite son. Eva insists that she continued to feel responsible for Plum, even after Plum became an adult. She felt that after the war, Plum was regressing as a human being—addicted to heroine, he was becoming a child once again. As a mother, Eva felt a strange instinct to treat him like a child again—in a way, to "give birth" to him again. And yet, of course, Eva couldn't do this—so instead, she burned him to death, giving him the symbolic, fiery "birth" of ascending to Heaven.

It's possible to consider Eva's explanation deeply sympathetic and yet wholly unconvincing. Eva is clearly a loving mother, and considers Plum her most beloved child. And yet perhaps she's too overbearing in her relationship

with Plum—her emotional connection with Plum is so intense that she can't bear the slightest tragedies in his life, let alone the tragedy of his heroine addiction and depression. In short, Eva loves Ralph too much, and in a way, burning Ralph is a suicide, not a murder—Eva is killing a huge part of herself, and she never recovers emotionally.

1927 Quotes

She was not only a little drunk, she was weary and had been for weeks. Her only child's wedding—the culmination of all she had been, thought or done in this world—had dragged from her energy and stamina even she did not know she possessed. Her house had to be thoroughly cleaned, chickens had to be plucked, cakes and pies made, and for weeks she, her friends and her daughter had been sewing. Now it was all happening and it took only a little cane juice to snap the cords of fatigue and damn the white curtains that she had pinned on the stretcher only the morning before.

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene, Helene Sabat Wright

Related Themes:

Page Number: 79-80

Explanation and Analysis

Helene Wright presides over the wedding of her child, Nel Wright. Helene has spent her entire adult life immersing herself in the social life of a married, "classy" woman. She does all the right things—goes to church, hosts dinner parties, befriends her neighbors, etc. Now, Helene is about to experience the defining part of her life as a well-off wife: the wedding of her daughter. She spends a huge amount of time preparing for the wedding—she knows perfectly well how important it is, both for her daughter and for her "image" in the community.

And yet the description of the wedding is strangely bitter and melancholy. Helene's entire life has been building up to this scene—and it's quite the anticlimax, despite Helene's cathartic drunkenness during the celebration itself. Morrison seems to be critiquing the stereotypes of domestic, female life, a life that's overly concerned with the material trappings of success and happiness, and yet neglects real happiness and real emotional connections. (Helene is never shown to be particularly close to Nel—she seems to love being perceived as a good mother more than she loves her own daughter.)

"I built that road," he could say. How much better sundown would be than the end of a day in the restaurant, where a good day's work was marked by the number of dirty plates and the weight of the garbage bin. "I built that road." People would walk over his sweat for years. Perhaps a sledge hammer would come crashing down on his foot, and when people asked him how come he limped, he could say, "Got that building the New Road."

Related Characters: Jude Greene (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jude—the new husband of Nel Wright—fantasizes about his future. Jude's greatest aspiration is to build a road—specifically, the New River Road that is to link the Bottom to the surrounding community. For Jude, getting work building the New River Road is more than just a job—it's a way of giving meaning and dignity to his life. Jude plans to measure every stage of his life—his youth, his middle-age, and even his painful old age, in which he can barely walk—in relationship to the road and his work.

Unbeknownst to Jude, however, the New River Road is a sham—a lie, designed by the white establishment to inspire false hope in young, ambitious black people like Jude. Jude is ambitious, but he's too eager to define success in the terms the white community gives him. Because of such a flaw in his personality, Jude is ultimately a tragic character—a strong young man who becomes more cynical and more hopeless with each passing year.

1937 Quotes

"But Jude," she would say, "you *knew* me. All those days and years, Jude, you *knew* me. My ways and my hands and how my stomach folded and how we tried to get Mickey to nurse and how about that time when the landlord said... but you said... and I cried, Jude. You knew me and had listened to the things I said in the night, and heard me in the bathroom and laughed at my raggedy girdle and I laughed too because I knew you too, Jude. So how could you leave me when you knew me?"

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene (speaker), Jude Greene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

Nel Wright discovers that Jude has been having an affair with her best friend, Sula. Jude has been married to Nel for many years—they have children together, and consider each other close friends as well as lovers. As the quotation makes clear, Nel interprets Jude's decision to leave her as an attack on Nel's very identity. If Jude knows Nel so completely, how could he abandon her? Only if he has decided that Nel isn't worth knowing. The passage is a good example of how Morrison's female characters internalize their own mistreatment—in other words, instead of blaming Jude for being an adulterer, Nel concludes that she is the problem, and essentially blames herself for her husband's misdeeds.

"The real hell of Hell is that it is forever." Sula said that. She said doing anything forever and ever was hell. Nel didn't understand it then, but now in the bathroom, trying to feel, she thought, "If I could be sure that I could stay here in this small white room with the dirty tile and water gurgling in the pipes and my head on the cool rim of this bathtub and never have to go out the door, I would be happy. If I could be certain that I never had to get up and flush the toilet, go in the kitchen, watch my children grow up and die, see my food chewed on my plate... Sula was wrong. Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change."

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene, Sula Peace (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107-108

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Morrison shows us the fundamental divide between her two female protagonists, Nel and Sula: Sula craves constant change, while Nel craves sameness and stability. By this point in the text, Sula has seduced Nel's husband, Jude, resulting in Jude's decision to walk away from Nel and break up their marriage.

Without fully explaining why Sula chooses to sleep with her best friend's husband, Morrison suggests that Sula is more interested in the thrill of sudden change than she is in the constancy of friendship, let alone marriage. Sula's desire for adventure and excitement seem to stem from the way she was raised—like her grandmother, Eva Peace, she's comfortable when she's "on the road," in the process of doing many things at once. Nel, on the other hand, thinks of change as a kind of hell. Like her mother, Helene, Nel is afraid of the world's inevitable changes—death, impoverishment, etc. She's been raised to conceive of life as a constant process of decay. It's partly for this reason that Nel chooses to marry Jude in the first place—Jude, a husband, represents some peace and relief from the world's unpredictability. In a way, Nel and Sula represent two sides of femininity: unending life force and timid domesticity.

1939 Quotes

When the word got out about Eva being put in Sunnydale, the people in the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach. Later, when they saw how she took Jude, then ditched him for others, and heard how he bought a bus ticket to Detroit (where he bought but never mailed birthday cards to his sons), they forgot all about Hannah's easy ways (or their own) and said she was a bitch. Everybody remembered the plague of robins that announced her return, and the tale about her watching Hannah burn was stirred up again...

Related Characters: Hannah Peace, Jude Greene, Sula Peace, Eva Peace

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Here, as in other passages of the novel, the people of the Bottom become like a single, unitary character. Over the years, Sula acquires a reputation for being a "bitch" and an untrustworthy, devious woman. She sends Eva Peace, her own grandmother, into a nursing home, despite the fact that Eva has been a caretaker to hundreds of children. The townspeople also condemn Sula for sleeping with Jude, Nel's husband.

Notice the sexism of the townspeople's comments, however. They condemn Sula for "breaking up the marriage," but seem not to dislike Jude for cheating on his wife. By the same token, the townspeople seem more interested in attacking women's reputations than in consistency—they criticize Hannah for being "easy," then criticize Sula for watching her death. Perhaps most tellingly, the townspeople re-interpret an ambiguous sign (the "plague of robins") to rationalize their ideas about Sula. Where before

the robins seemed innocent to many, they're now retroactively made to foreshadow Sula's wickedness. The point isn't that Sula is a heroin and the townspeople are wicked; the point is that the townspeople, whether or not they're right to condemn Sula, traffic in self-righteous stereotypes about women—sexism disguised as morality.

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. 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. In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness of Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew quite well that He had four, and that the fourth explained Sula.

Related Characters: Sula Peace

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 117-118

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage (an homage to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*), we learn that Sula's reputation for wickedness has a strangely positive influence on the Bottom. Because everyone in town thinks of Sula as a demon, they can't force themselves to treat their own families and friends with animosity—on the contrary, they stop beating their children, love their significant others more deeply, etc. In short, Sula becomes a scapegoat for the Bottom—a "vessel" into which the townspeople pour all their hatred, instead of taking it out on each other. Sula doesn't seem to deserve the full extent of the townspeople's anger (see quote above), but because she receives so much anger, her overall effect on the Bottom seems to be positive.

Lovemaking seemed to her, at first, the creation of a special kind of joy. She thought she liked the sootiness of sex and its comedy; she laughed a great deal during the raucous beginnings, and rejected those lovers who regarded sex as healthy or beautiful. Sexual aesthetics bored her. Although she did not regard sex as ugly (ugliness was boring also), she liked to think of it as wicked. But as her experiences multiplied she realized that not only was it not wicked, it was not necessary for her to conjure up the idea of wickedness in order to participate fully.

Related Characters: Sula Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Morrison tells us about Sula's attitude toward sex. By this point in the text, we know that Sula has had an affair with Jude, the husband of her best friend, Nel Wright. Sula's attitude toward sex is both serious and casual. At first, she regards sex as something wicked and sinful--and all the more enjoyable because it *is* wicked. But later on, Sula becomes more accustomed to sex. She finds that she can enjoy it on its own terms--that is, without thinking of it as being transgressive or forbidden.

Sula is, in other words, a sexually "liberated" woman. In contrast to the people of her community, she regards sex as a perfectly ordinary thing--enjoyable and yet not special. Morrison isn't trying to excuse Sula's decision to sleep with Jude, but she *is* trying to explain it. As we can see, Sula doesn't really regard her sexual experiences with Jude as a betrayal of her old friend, Nel--she's so used to thinking of sex as a banal experience that she forgets that Nel doesn't share her point of view.

She lay down again on the bed and sang a little wandering tune made up of the words *I have sung all the songs all the songs I have sung all the songs there are* until, touched by her own lullaby, she grew drowsy, and in the hollow of near-sleep she tasted the acridness of gold, felt the chill of alabaster and smelled the dark, sweet stench of loam.

Related Characters: Ajax, Sula Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Here Sula has a strange sexual experience with Ajax, a handsome man whom she befriends after she's left the Bottom altogether. Sula makes love to Ajax and then falls asleep next to him. Unlike most of her sexual partners, Ajax inspires a feeling of levity and excitement in Sula--she imagines Ajax as a being made of gold and loam (rich, fertile soil).

It's important to note that the passage doesn't name Ajax at all--Sula thinks of Ajax as something more basic and elemental than a sexual partner; he's practically a force of nature. In fact, the passage is so abstract that it's difficult to tell what, exactly is going on. Sula seems to embody a feminine sense of youth and vitality, and yet the language of the passage*also* points to Sula as a penetrating, masculine presence--boring through Ajax (who is portrayed in the traditionally feminine terms of a passive, fertile soil) until she reaches his "dark, sweet" center. Morrison reminds us of Sula's androgynous nature (remember her birthmark). She also suggests that, contrary to what the sexist people of the Bottom believe, Sula is capable of feeling a deep romantic bond with her partners.

1940 Quotes

❝ I know what every colored woman in this country is doing."
"What's that?"
"Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world."
"Really? What have you got to show for it?"
"Show? To who? 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."

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene, Sula Peace (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Nel visits Sula, who is slowly dying of a mysterious disease, and Sula gives an interesting justification for her actions--for sleeping with Jude, traveling across the country, putting Eva in a home, etc. Sula explains that she's spent her adult life trying to fully "live in this world." In order to escape the fate of many black women (being silenced, oppressed, etc.), Sula has always aimed to be strong and independent.

Nel points out the obvious flaw in the way Sula has lived her life: it's lonely being strong and independent without anyone else. By choosing to travel the country and be free with her sexuality, Sula knows full-well that she's condemning herself to a life of loneliness (most people in her life will think of her as a "bitch"). But Sula places more value on freedom and independence than she does on community. Where Nel and Helene Wright think of community and connection as the highest good, Sula concludes that personal freedom and personal experience are the only things worth living for.

❝ She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel."

Related Characters: Sula Peace (speaker), Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 149

Explanation and Analysis

In this surreal passage, Sula seems to die and then briefly awake from death. Almost amusingly, Sula tells herself that she needs to talk to Nel as soon as possible--she can't wait to tell her old friend about what it feels like to die.

The passage is a good example of Morrison's magical realism (see quotes above for more details). But it's also a surprising reminder that in spite of her arguments with Nel, Sula has always considered Nel her best and closest friend--even after Sula slept with Nel, and Nel came to hate Sula. The passage, therefore, is poignant and tragic: it's the last sentence of the chapter, and afterwards, Sula and Nel never speak again (because Sula is dead). Morrison doesn't offer Nel and Sula the happy reunion they both seem to crave, but at the same time she reaffirms their constant connection, which lasts even unto death.

1941 Quotes

❝ It dazzled them, at first, and they were suddenly quiet. Their hooded eyes swept over the place where their hope had lain since 1927. There was the promise: leaf-dead. The teeth unrepaired, the coal credit cut off, the chest pains unattended, the school shoes unbought, the rush-stuffed mattresses, the broken toilets, the leaning porches, the slurred remarks and the staggering childish malevolence of their employers. All there in blazing sunlit ice rapidly becoming water.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the people of the Bottom arrive at all that exists of the New River Road. For decades, black people in the area have thought of the New River Road with a deep optimism. The Road will connect their community to the rest of the world, and for some, like Jude, it will provide steady employment for years to come, and a sense of accomplishment at having built something lasting.

And yet all the people's optimism has been in vain. As everyone can now see, the Road was never meant to be completed--it was an elaborate scheme, designed to keep the black community poor and uneducated. Whenever the white establishment in the area chose to deny the Bottom money or resources (school funding, new roads, etc.), it could offer a simple excuse: the money is going to pay for the Road. It's clear, now, that the people with power in the area have been lying all along: the people of the Bottom have been suffering for years, for nothing.

1965 Quotes

❝ Nobody colored lived much up in the Bottom any more. White people were building towers for television stations up there and there was a rumor about a golf course or something. Anyway, hill land was more valuable now, and those black people who had moved down right after the war and in the fifties couldn't afford to come back even if they wanted to. Except for the few blacks still huddled by the river bend, and some undemolished houses on Carpenter's Road, only rich white folks were building homes in the hills. Just like that, they had changed their minds and instead of keeping the valley floor to themselves, now they wanted a hilltop house with a river view and a ring of elms. The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapter of the novel, we return to a larger historical view of the Bottom. Ironically, the Bottom--the high, dry land where a black community suffered but also thrived--has now become extremely desirable to white people, since it offers a beautiful view of the surrounding valley. So now, black people have been "bought out" of the Bottom, and forced to live near the river (which is precisely where their ancestors wanted to live 100 years ago, but were prevented from living).

In a sense, the black community has gotten exactly what it always wanted: land near the river. But of course, the land is no longer valuable--because the white establishment *says* it's not valuable. The passage is a surprising reminder that the only real power is the power of naming--being able to say which parts of the town are and aren't worth living in. Morrison also uses the passage to mourn the decline of the strong, close black community in the area. Even in the 20th century, when society becomes less segregated, the black community continues to suffer and be exploited by whites, and doesn't even have a close-knit community to fall back on. (Morrison isn't trying to say that life was *better* when black people were forced to live in the same place; she's trying to suggest that some supposed "progress" for the black community isn't really progress at all).

What did old Eva mean by “you watched?” How could she help seeing it? She was right there. But Eva didn't say, “see,” she said “watched.”
"I did not watch it. I just saw it." But it was there anyway, as it had always been, the old feeling and the old question. The good feeling she had had when Chicken's hands slipped. She hadn't wondered about that in years. "Why didn't I feel bad when it happened? How come it felt so good to see him fall?"

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene, Eva Peace (speaker), Chicken Little, Sula Peace

Related Themes:

Page Number: 170

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nel takes her leave of Eva Peace, now a bitter old woman. Eva tells Nel that she knows everything about Chicken Little's death--an event that happened years and years ago, when Nel and Sula were just children. Eva accuses Nel of watching as Sula's hands slipped and Chicken Little fell into the water.

Everything in the passage hinges on the difference between seeing and watching. Seeing is passive--we have eyes, so we can't help but see things around us. Watching is entirely different: to watch something is to choose to pay attention to it, and even be entertained by it, yet not act. As Eva suspects, Nel did not see Chicken Little's death; she watched it. Eva has always been a little afraid and a little jealous of Sula's sense of freedom and liberation--as a result, she got an unwilling thrill of satisfaction when she saw Sula make a mistake and drop Chicken Little into the water. For years, Nel has been denying the truth to herself: she was pleased to watch Chicken Little's death because she wanted Sula to fail.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.

Related Characters: Nel Wright / Nel Wright Greene (speaker), Sula Peace, Jude Greene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In the final sentences of the novel, Nel comes to realize that her greatest friend and companion in life was always Sula, not Jude. For years, Nel has been telling herself that Sula is her enemy--Sula slept with Jude, Nel's husband, and broke up Nel's marriage in the process. And yet in spite of everything, Nel has never had a friend who knew her as well as Sula did. Nel's realization matches Sula's final words in the novel, "Wait'll I tell Nel," suggesting that in spite of their arguments and rivalries, the two continue to love each other and be bound by something stronger than all their differences.

In no small part, Nel and Sula have been pushed apart by the racism, sexism, and intolerance of their society. Nel has been content to live a docile, domestic life--Sula, on the other hand, has refused to live so passively. As a result, Sula has spent most of her life being free and experimental with her sexuality--a lifestyle that Nel was always unable to understand.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The narrator begins by describing an Ohio neighborhood, which used to stand in the same place where there is currently a "Medallion City Golf Course." The neighborhood was inhabited mostly by black people, and was called "the Bottom." In the Bottom there used to be beautiful trees, and children playing in them. The narrator notes other places in the neighborhood as well: hair salons, grills, pool halls, etc.

In the first paragraphs of the novel, Morrison satirizes another great American writer, William Faulkner, who began his book The Sound and the Fury *by bemoaning the disappearance of a golf course after the Civil War, and with it, Southern white plantation culture. Morrison turns this sentiment on its head, criticizing "white culture" for swallowing up a vibrant African-American community to build something as banal as a golf course.*

In the old days of the Bottom, if an insurance man or a rent collector were to come to the area, he'd see black people playing banjos and harmonicas, perhaps laughing along with black women "in a flowered dress." The black women would sing and dance.

Morrison portrays the Bottom from the perspective of an outsider. The Bottom seems almost utopian—men seem to be getting along with women, there's music in the air, etc. But of course, Morrison will quickly refute this nostalgic sentiment.

In the old days, the narrator continues, the black people in the Bottom would tell jokes to cheer themselves up—and there was a lot to be "cheered up" about. At the time, there were slaves. White farmers would often offer to give slaves their freedom, along with some free "bottom land," in return for their hard labor. When the slaves completed the hard labor, they would ask the white farmer for freedom and bottom land. The farmer would give the slave his freedom, but hedge on giving away "bottom land." The slaves had assumed that "bottom land" meant good, fertile soil in the valley. The white farmer would chuckle and explain that "bottom land" referred to land at the top of the hills in the distance. White farmers supposedly called this land "bottom land" because it was close to the bottom of heaven. In the end, the slaves were freed and given free land, but this land—up in the hills—was dry, arid, and difficult to farm. In this way, blacks in Ohio eventually settled in the Bottom—the area high up on the hills where the farming was tough.

In this important opening section, we see how the name "Bottom" itself is proof of the consistent oppression of black people in the United States. The white farmers manipulate language itself to trick blacks into accepting lackluster land—confident, of course, that their former slaves have no real ability to stand up to their manipulations, because they have almost no legal or social rights. From the very beginning, we can see that "naming"—that is to say, writing, communication, and interpretation—has an important kind of power. As an author, words obviously hold great importance for Morrison, and this theme informs her overall project as a writer as well. She is a passionate advocate for black rights, and partly seeks to use words and names to "re-wire" systems of black oppression in America.

Despite the tough conditions in the Bottom, blacks succeeded in building a strong community for themselves. There were even some white people who genuinely believed that Bottom land really was the best land. The narrator closes by noting that "as early as 1920," the blacks in the Bottom were preoccupied with a man named Shadrack, and with a little girl named Sula.

The African-Americans of the Bottom succeed in establishing a happy community for themselves, but they always succeed in spite *of whites, not because of them. Morrison introduces two of her important characters here, even though she won't come to Sula herself until much later.*

1919

Beginning in 1920 in the Bottom, there is a traditional "**National Suicide Day**" on January 3. The founder of this day, a man named Shadrack, celebrates it by himself, every year. He fought in World War I, and returned to the Bottom visibly ravaged by the fighting. The narrator recalls what he was like before he left to fight. He was only 20 years old, and popular with the ladies. He was deployed to fight in France, where he had to run through shellfire, and pierced his own foot with a nail. At the close of this battle, Shadrack was knocked out.

It's typical for Morrison to begin a chapter with a word or phrase that isn't immediately comprehensible, and to only explain it later in the text. The cryptic introduction of "National Suicide Day" sets the chapter's tone, and also hooks the reader's interest to figure out the source of this morbid holiday. In describing a Christ-like black soldier (Shadrack pierces his foot with a nail), Morrison alludes to another William Faulkner novel, A Fable, *a story of World War I that's full of Christian symbols. Again, the implication is that Faulkner has been too quick to exclude blacks from his lofty visions of tragedy and redemption.*

After being injured in a World War I battle in 1917, Shadrack wakes up in a hospital. He tries to eat from the food tray that is waiting in front of him, but finds that his hands "grew like Jack's beanstalk" when he tries to grab a utensil. Shadrack becomes so anxious and frightened by his own hands that he is put into a straitjacket.

Like so many soldiers who witness carnage in battle, Shadrack doesn't just become frightened of fighting—he becomes frightened of himself. He clearly has severe PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), a condition that was not understood at the time.

Eventually, Shadrack is released from the hospital, and given money and "official looking papers." As Shadrack walks out of the hospital, he begins to feel anxious about the concrete street beneath him. He walks west, "stumbling and sweating." Suddenly, he begins to cry. He's now 22 years old, and has no idea who he is: he has no past, no "language, no tribe." The only thing Shadrack believes anymore is that his hands are monstrous. He has no idea where he is. He begins to scream. The narrator writes that "they" take him to jail.

Shadrack's story is rife with Christian overtones—like Christ, risen from the grave, he "goes west." And yet Shadrack is a Christ-figure who is entirely tragic—he sacrifices himself for the good of his country, but isn't rewarded or even thanked for his sacrifice. Instead of helping him, the authorities throw him in jail. It's notable that Morrison never says who "they" are, as Shadrack himself doesn't likely know who "they" (those who essentially control his fate) are either. We can surmise that "they" represent the racist institutions and government authorities that sent black men to fight for their *interests, and then continued to mistreat and oppress the same black men when they came home.*

Shadrack sits in a jail cell. Keeping his hands behind his back, Shadrack walks to the toilet in his cell. He looks at his reflection in the toilet water, and sees "a grave black face." Somehow, the sight of his face gives Shadrack a sense of calmness. He stares at his hands and is surprised to find that they are "courteously still." He falls into a deep sleep. The next day he is released from jail and driven back to the Bottom, only 22 miles away.

It's no accident that Shadrack is looking at his own face in a toilet—it's as if years of abuse and racism have trained him to have the worst possible view of himself. Strangely, Shadrack's despair and self-loathing calm him down—he seems to be accepting his own misery, and seeing it as something comfortable and familiar. Throughout the novel, other characters will go through similar stages, as Morrison shows how people can cope with great pain, but also how sometimes the coping mechanisms themselves prevent people from ever escaping that pain.

When Shadrack returns to his home, the people assume that he's gone crazy. His eyes are wild and his hair is long and dirty. On January 3, 1920, he walks through the streets ringing a bell and declaring **National Suicide Day**. The next year, he does the same thing. By this time, the people have adjusted to Shadrack's presence in the neighborhood. Shadrack lives in a shack that used to belong to his grandfather. He sells fish to make a living, and although he's loud, drunk, and obscene, he never attacks or hurts anyone. Although the people continue to regard Shadrack as insane, his Suicide Day becomes an accepted part of life in the Bottom, as much a part of the calendar as New Year's Day or Christmas.

The overarching theme of this chapter is acceptance: acceptance of racism, acceptance of tragedy, acceptance of one's own inferiority. By the time Shadrack returns to his home, he's been conditioned to hate himself and hate his life—his celebration of suicide proves as much. And even though the other townspeople laugh at Shadrack, their eventual acceptance of Suicide Day is a subtle symbol of their own cynical acceptance of their status as second-class citizens in a country governed by racists. More generally, Suicide Day also shows how tragedy can be dealt with by partitioning it off as separate from one's usual life—condensing it into one day so that it can be processed and even made light of.

1920

The chapter begins, "It had to be as far away from the Sundown House as possible." This chapter is told from the perspective of a woman named Helene Sabat. Helene is born in a New Orleans brothel called the Sundown House, to a "Creole whore." Helene is raised by her grandmother, and is told to reject her mother's "wild" way of life.

Once again, Morrison begins the chapter inscrutably, and takes her time letting us get our bearings. Nevertheless, we begin to get a sense for the pattern of the novel now, as each chapter begins in a new year, and details a character's turbulent life. From the beginning, the dominant theme of Helene's life is control—she's told to be good, moral, and pious, and her own mother is held up to her as a "bad example."

When Helene is a young woman, a seaman named Wiley Wright comes to New Orleans to visit his Great Aunt Cecile (Helene's grandmother). During his visit, Wiley becomes enamored with Helene. He proposes marriage to her, and Helene agrees. Wiley takes Helene to live with him in his home in the Bottom, near Medallion, Ohio. Wiley spends most of his time working as a cook on a ship that sails the Great Lakes. Helene doesn't mind Wiley being gone for so long—in fact, she prefers it this way.

Helene has lived among women all her life—whether as a young girl in a brothel or with her grandmother. She seems highly uncomfortable with men, and thus prefers a husband who's barely at home. For the rest of the novel, Wiley Wright won't have a single line—he's a negative presence in the novel: the father of a main character, but seemingly not an influence on her at all.

After being married to Wiley for nine years, Helene gives birth to a daughter, Nel, whom she adores. Secretly, Helene is happy that Nel is a plain child—she doesn't want Nel to have to experience the unwanted attention of men, as Helene herself has. Helene excels as a mother. In the Bottom, she is regarded as a pious and impressive woman—she regularly attends the conservative black church, and organizes banquets for black veterans of the war. Nevertheless, the people of the Bottom refuse to call Helene "Helene"—she is always "Helen" to them.

By coming to the North, Helene takes a gamble. On the plus side, she has new freedom, and the laws aren't as overtly racist as those in the South. But she also loses her New Orleans culture and her sense of connection with the land—represented by the dropping of the "e" in her name. Like Shadrack and most of the people in the Bottom, Helene makes the most of an imperfect situation by aspiring to respectability.

In November 1920, Helene receives a letter from Henri Martin, explaining that Helene's grandmother is ill. Helene is nervous about returning to New Orleans, since women at the time—both black and white—are increasingly prey to the advances of returning war veterans. Nevertheless, she decides to return to keep her grandmother company, bringing Nel with her. Helene doesn't tell Wiley that she is going—she only leaves him a note for when he returns from the Great Lakes.

Morrison has portrayed the helplessness and trauma of returning black veterans, but here she also shows the war's affect on citizens who are even more powerless: black women. Blacks are seen as inferior to whites, and women as inferior to men, so women like Helene have no real, secure protection from black or white men in American society.

Helene and Nel board a train bound for New Orleans. When they board, they make a mistake by accidentally walking into the "Whites only" car. Instead of walking out and going to the "Colored only" car, they try to walk through, only to be yelled at and called "gal" by the white conductor. This terrifies Helene—it reminds her of how vulnerable and afraid she felt in New Orleans.

In the 1920s, a black woman on a train car would have had no way of defending herself from an angry white conductor—he has total power over her, to use or abuse as he might wish. Helene's fear, then, is very real: she's forgotten, if only for a moment, the rigidly institutionalized racism of the South. The "colored only" sign and the condescending term "gal" are more examples of how the interpretation of a few simple words can have a huge impact on peoples' lives.

The chapter shifts to Nel's perspective. On the train to New Orleans, Nel witnesses her mother, Helene, fumbling with her tickets when the white conductor comes to collect them. Helene, afraid of being yelled at again, smiles a beautiful smile at the white conductor. Nel looks around the "colored only" car, and sees a group of black veterans glaring at Helene. When Helene finds her ticket, she tries to find a place to set her suitcase. Not a single black passenger helps her with her heavy bag. Nel feels ashamed of her mother—she can feel the hatred directed at her. In this moment, Nel resolves to "always be on guard": to make sure no man ever looks at her the way the veterans look at her mother.

Morrison makes an interesting choice in switching perspectives here so that we see the scene from Nel's point of view. Helene had seemed to be the protagonist of this chapter, but in reality Morrison moves seamlessly between characters and their unique perspectives. Even as a little girl, Nel quickly becomes conscious of the complicated struggle she will face as a black woman growing up—being overly deferential to whites might appease them, but such submissive pleasantness can also be seen as traitorous to black men, who likewise hold power over her.

As Nel and Helene travel down to New Orleans, the conditions on the train get worse and worse. Black passengers aren't allowed to use the toilets—they are made to rush out of the train when it is stopping to refuel, and urinate in the grass. After many long hours they arrive in New Orleans.

The conditions on the train mirror the status of black communities in America—the farther South Helene travels, the fewer social and legal rights she has, and the more she is treated like an animal.

In New Orleans, Nel and Helene make their ways to Cecile's house (until this moment, the narrator hadn't made it clear that Wiley's Great Aunt Cecile was also Helene's grandmother). When they arrive, they're saddened to see that Cecile has just died: they're too late. Inside the house, they meet a woman in a yellow dress. The woman and Helene coldly stare at each other, and Helene says that this is Rochelle, her own mother—Nel's grandmother. Nel is confused (she thought Cecile was her grandmother), but Helene explains that Cecile was Nel's *great*-grandmother. Nel says that Rochelle looks too young to be her grandmother. Rochelle laughs and says that she's forty-eight: "an old forty-eight." Helene tells Cecile that Nel is now 10 years old.

Here we meet Helene's mother, the "Creole whore" Helene has rebelled against her whole life by being so proper and chaste. Clearly Helene and Rochelle are not close at all, as Rochelle and Nel don't even know of each other's existence. Rochelle looks young because that is part of her job, and because 38 years is an unusually short gap between two generations of the family. Rochelle's cynical statement that she is "an old forty-eight" suggests that she has lived through many struggles and experienced much suffering.

Rochelle asks Helene if Nel is her only child, and compliments her for being pretty like Helene was. Rochelle speaks to Nel in Creole, but Nel doesn't understand. She switches to English, asks Nel's name, and introduces herself. Rochelle and Helene then have a terse, chilly exchange about Cecile's house. Helene is clearly angry that she came all this way only to miss seeing her grandmother and to find only Rochelle, "that painted canary who never said a word of greeting or affection." Rochelle hugs Nel quickly and leaves. Nel tentatively remarks on how Rochelle smelled good and her skin was soft. Helene responds that "much handled things are always soft."

It's clear that Helene considers Cecile to be her true mother, as Rochelle never showed her any affection or concern, and continues in a profession Helene finds shameful and sinful. Nel is mystified by all this, but can sense the tension between her mother and Rochelle. Helene's statement is pithy but also wise, and a rather tragic view of how great suffering or callousness is often hidden beneath (but also the cause of) a façade of beauty or delicacy.

Nel and Helene travel back to Medallion from New Orleans. When they return to their house, they find Helene's note in exactly the same place where Helene left it. Nel thinks about her travels. She remembers having to squat in the grass to urinate while traveling on the train. She remembers her fear of the soldiers who glared at her mother. She realizes, as if for the first time, that she is "different." She goes to look in the mirror, and whispers at her own reflection, "I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." She repeats the word "me," and each time she feels more powerful—but also more afraid. Nel falls asleep, dreaming of all the places she wants to visit one day. The narrator notes that she will never leave Medallion, Ohio again.

Wiley Wright's absence from his family's life is made especially clear here, as he hasn't even come home since Helene left for New Orleans. In this section, we see Nel facing a similar struggle to Shadrack, and, like him, finding clarity by looking at her own reflection. Nel has now become more conscious of the fact that as a black woman, she is considered less valuable and even less human than whites and men—and the only way she can protect herself from internalizing this into depression, self-hatred, and an inferiority complex is to focus on herself alone—the truth she sees in front of her, in her reflection. The narrator briefly takes an omniscient view of Nel's life to show the tragic contrast between her youthful dreams and the mundane reality of her life.

The narrator says that Nel is about to meet Sula, a girl whom she sees in school but never plays with, because Sula's parents are supposed to be "sooty." The first time Sula visits Helene's house to play with Nel, Helene falls in love with Sula—Sula is well-behaved, and nothing like her mother. Nel feels comfortable around Sula, and even prefers Sula's dirty house to her own. Sula's mother, Hannah, is a woman unlike Helene—she never scolds or yells. Sula also lives with her grandmother—a one-legged woman named Eva, whom Nel finds fascinating.

In this coda to the chapter, Morrison alludes to the events of the future, and also gives an early glimpse of the contrast between Sula and Nel, the novel's two main protagonists. Nel is orderly, and seemingly the perfect image of her strict, respectable mother. Sula, on the other hand, is anything but orderly: she's independent and eccentric, and has a family that is similarly strange and fascinating.

1921

Sula Peace lives in a big house. It was "created" and ruled over by her grandmother, Eva Peace, one of the oldest people in the Bottom. Long ago, Eva had two legs, but now she's left with only one—nobody ever speaks about the disability in front of her. Behind her back, people invent fanciful stories about how she lost her leg—it "ran away from her," for example. Others say Eva deliberately allowed a train to run over her leg so that she could collect a large insurance policy. Eva sits in a low, wagon-like structure that allows her to move around, so that she's no higher than most children.

Eva, deprived of one of her legs, is seemingly imprisoned in her own body, to the point where she can barely move where she wants to go. And yet Eva doesn't seem like a prisoner at all. She "rules" her house, and seems to command great respect over the people of the Bottom.

Eva commands respect from the people in the neighborhood. Everyone knows that she married a man named BoyBoy, and had three children: Hannah, Eva, nicknamed Pearl, and Ralph, nicknamed Plum. BoyBoy was an abusive husband—he drank too much, and took out his anger on his family. He left Eva—who had both legs at the time—so that she had to take care of the children alone, and he showed no signs of ever returning. Eva threw herself into raising her children, refusing to collapse into anger or frustration.

BoyBoy's story is a good example men maintaining power over women: women are confined to a domestic sphere, while men have more agency to escape responsibility and travel independently. This also shows another way people cope with suffering and tragedy—Eva centers her life around her children as a way of dealing with her husband's abandonment.

Years before, when Eva was first taking care of her three children by herself, she depended upon the kindness of her neighbors, such as the Suggs family and the Jackson family. She often thought back to her marriage to BoyBoy. BoyBoy worked for a white carpenter, with whose help he built a cabin for his family. When they were first married, Eva was very much in love with BoyBoy.

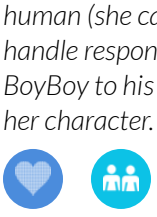
BoyBoy's name—especially given his relationship with a powerful white employer—was probably given to him by a white man, who condescendingly called him "Boy" until the name stuck. BoyBoy's very name is thus a sign of his social inferiority to whites, and also a reminder of the power of naming.

During Eva's first winter as a single mother, she sacrificed her own happiness and health for her children, giving her last bites of food to Ralph (Plum), who was only a baby at the time. Eva then left her children with the Suggs family, saying she'd be back soon. When she returned, 18 months later, she had only one leg. Eva, apparently well-off, gave the Suggs family ten dollars for their troubles, took her children, and proceeded to build them a large house. She made money by renting out BoyBoy's old cabin.

Morrison has written, "Black women seem able to combine the nest and adventure." Here, we see Eva being adventurous—going out into the world and even losing a leg—and yet also being a highly capable mother. Eva subverts the clichés of femininity: she takes care of her children, and yet doesn't confine *herself to the "nest."*

Some three years after leaving, BoyBoy returned to Medallion, and went to see Eva and his children. Eva prepared lemonade for BoyBoy's visit, not knowing if she'd scream at her husband, embrace him, or attack him. BoyBoy arrived, dressed in beautiful, prosperous clothes. He greeted Eva warmly, and Eva greeted him back, smiling. They conversed easily, talking about BoyBoy's experiences. BoyBoy didn't ask about his children at all. As Eva listened to BoyBoy talk, she remembered her hatred. BoyBoy said goodbye to Eva, and as she waved to him, Eva knew that she would hate him forever.

In this scene, we see the real difference between Eva and BoyBoy. It's not so much that BoyBoy is worldly and Eva is domestic—rather, it's that Eva is capable of responsibly acting the part of a complete human (she can travel and *care for her children) while BoyBoy can't handle responsibility, and remains a "boy." Eva doesn't confront BoyBoy to his face—her hate wells up inside her, setting the tone for her character.*



Following BoyBoy's visit, Eva continued taking care of her family alone. She allowed her cousins to visit her house, where she provided them with generous lodgings. She also took in many visitors, including young children who had nowhere else to go.

We get the sense that Eva takes on more responsibilities to prove to herself that she's more of an adult than BoyBoy—it's her way of avenging his betrayal and proving her own strength.

In 1921, Eva's granddaughter, Sula, is eleven years old. Eva has had three children. By this time, Eva has become the resident "namer" in the Bottom: all the women bring their babies to Eva to be named. Eva raises many eyebrows when she names multiple children "Dewey," and some of the mothers in the neighborhood think she's losing her mind. But over time, Eva's names become "true"—all the children named Dewey, for instance, become friends with each other, and love "nobody but themselves." The deweys (written in lowercase throughout the rest of the book) become a close-knit group: even though they're different ages, they start school at the same time, and when one of them is bad, they're all punished.

Here we see the importance of names for the community as a whole. Eva is old and respected, and so she's given the authority of naming the children. It's also here that we get an extreme, almost fantastical example of why names are important, and how something's name affects the very character of that thing. For the deweys, their name is like a self-fulfilling prophecy: by giving children the same name, Eva ensures that the children are forever bound together. The danger of this kind of collectivism (i.e., a group of children all being "the deweys") is that none of the children in the group can ever be an individual, and therefore none of the children can ever really grow up.

In 1920, the narrator remembers, Eva had given a name to an adult who was new to the Bottom: Tar Baby. The man was handsome and pale-skinned, and Eva immediately recognized that he was completely white. Tar Baby was a "mountain boy," and had no friends. He was a heavy drinker, and couldn't pay his rent. But he had a beautiful singing voice, and was always the loudest singer in the churches. In 1921, he became the first person in the neighborhood to try to join Shadrack's **National Suicide Day**.

It's not clear if Eva is right or not—Tar Baby could be half-black, or a particularly pale-skinned black man—but it's the interpretation *that matters. Race is an infamously fluid concept, and even if Tar Baby is genetically black or part-black, the fact that the community perceives him as white means that on one level he really* is *white. We get the sense that Tar Baby has come to the Bottom because he is depressed, as if he's drawn to the general misery of the community.*

The narrator gives more information about Eva's children. Pearl married at age fourteen and moved to Michigan—she had a quiet marriage, full of small moments of unhappiness. Hannah married a man named Rekus who died when Sula, their child, was three. Strangely—considering how much Eva hated BoyBoy—all of Eva's children loved men. Although Eva herself was very old, she "had a regular flock of gentleman callers." They don't make love to her, but they "tease" and "peck." In public, Eva encourages all women to be loyal to their husbands—preparing their meals and ironing their shirts, etc.

The novel has the texture of a family saga—in order to tell the story of one character (this chapter, it had seemed, was supposed to be about Sula), the narrator has to tell the stories of half a dozen other characters. Eva recognizes that BoyBoy isn't representative of all men, and ultimately seems to advocate social stability at all costs: control, balance, and harmony between men and women (even if this means women being submissive).

Eva's daughter, Hannah, "ripples with sex." After her husband Rekus dies, she has many admirers. Hannah is an expert at making men feel good about themselves. She has sex with many men, but never lets them spend the night with her—she only has sex during the day. Once, Sula, Hannah's daughter, comes home from school to find her mother having sex with a man. From this episode, Sula learns that sex is "pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable."

The fact that Sula catches Hannah having sex will be important later on in the book. Because of what she sees, Sula already seems to view sex dispassionately, but also as a very common, even central thing—and this is precisely why she finds it so unremarkable. Sex is important and ever-present, but not sacred, sinful, or strange.

The narrator briefly describes Eva's youngest child, Plum. Plum fought in the war in 1917, and returned to the U.S. in 1919. He didn't return to Medallion until 1920, however, and spent the intervening year visiting New York, Chicago, and other large American cities. When he returned after the end of the year, Plum was quiet and dirty looking. His family wanted to hear about his time in the cities, but he never spoke about this period in his life. Plum didn't eat much, and spent all his time alone in his room, on the bottom floor of Eva's house. Hannah discovered that Plum used a bent spoon, and passed on this information to the rest of the family.

Plum experiences the same things as Shadrack: the agonies of World War I, and then the return to a society that offers him no thanks, help, or comfort. But whereas Shadrack finds a tragic compromise in his miserable Suicide Day ritual, we can surmise from Morrison's description that Plum has turned to drugs, presumably heroin (he doesn't eat anything, and uses a spoon for cooking).

One night in early 1921, Eva walks downstairs to see her son in his room. When Eva enters Plum's room, she finds him lying in bed. Near him there is a glass of what looks like strawberry crush (an icy drink). Plum wakes up and finds his mother standing over him. He whispers, "You so purty, Mama." Eva begins to cry. She turns and drinks from the glass, only to find that it isn't soda at all—it's water tainted with blood. Plum whispers for Eva to leave him alone, claiming he is all right.

Eva clearly loves Plum—she was willing to sacrifice her own health to make sure that he survived as a baby—and there's some ominous foreshadowing of how that fierce love will try and cope with Plum's new, miserable state. The glass of watery blood may be some part of Plum's heroin ritual, but it also suggests, on a more symbolic level, the "water and blood" of giving birth. This is an apt symbol, given that later on in the book, Eva will describe what she does next as an alternative *to giving birth.*

That night, Plum, still sitting in bed, feels a strange, "warm light" pouring all over his body. As he enters a state of delirium, Eva stands over him, soaking him with kerosene. Then she takes a piece of newspaper, lights it on **fire**, and throws it onto Plum's body. Immediately Plum is engulfed in flames. Eva turns and uses her crutches to climb back to her room.

In this frightening scene, Eva murders her own son, seemingly the child she loved most. It's impossible to fully grasp why Eva would do such a thing—the complexity of motives behind the act is too great—but even here, there's an element of harsh mercy in her behavior. She knows that Plum is in pain, and she can't stand to see him that way. It's also slightly comforting that we see this from Plum's perspective, and recognize that he feels his death as something pleasant and welcome. This scene introduces fire as an important symbol in the book: something simultaneously comforting, purifying, and destructive. It also foreshadows another tragic scene of a mother killing her child out of mercy—the central act of Morrison's famous novel Beloved.

A short time later, Eva hears the shouts of Hannah and "some child" coming from outside her room. Hannah rushes to Eva's door, screaming that Plum is burning. Eva replies, "Is? My baby? Burning?" The two women—mother and daughter—looked at one another, silently. After a long time, Hannah closes her eyes and runs away from Eva.

We can sense that Hannah knows what Eva did, though it's not clear how. Eva's ambiguous act of harsh love (or deferred responsibility) will have repercussions for years, as it affects every member of the family, not just Eva and Plum.

1922

It is 1922, and Sula and Nel are walking through the Bottom. They're going to the local ice cream parlor, Edna Finch's Mellow House, even though it's a little too cold for ice cream. As they walk, men—sitting on stoops and front porches—notice them walking. Some of the men tip their hats, while others open and close their thighs. One 21-year-old man, whose name is Ajax, watches Sula and Nel and says, "Pig meat." Sula and Nel are secretly delighted to have attracted the attention of the men. They enjoy walking through town and exciting the men—whom they still don't entirely understand.

Sula and Nel are young, but they're already viewed as sexual objects by many men. For now, the girls are excited by this new attention, as they haven't experienced anything concrete that could give them a negative view of patriarchy and masculinity. Ajax seems like a sexist, brutish man here, but he appears as a more complicated character later on in the novel.

The narrator jumps back to describe how Nel and Sula meet. They attend Garfield Primary School together. Both are lonely and quiet as children, and like to fantasize about meeting a "prince" one day. Nel lives in a very orderly house, presided over by her mother, Helene. Sula's house, on the other hand, is always chaotic when she is growing up. Yet Nel and Sula have a lot in common: they both have "distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers," and in 1922 they are both twelve years old. Nel is light-skinned, almost mulatto—if she'd been any lighter-skinned, some of the "truebloods" in the Bottom would have bullied her. Sula's skin is dark brown, and she has a strange **birthmark** above her eyebrow, which is shaped like a stemmed rose. Every year, her birthmark grows darker.

Nel and Sula have only the most naïve understanding of men, based on storybooks and fairy tales. Ironically, even though Nel and Sula seem to come from opposite households, their lives are very much the same. It's also in this chapter that we're given the first description of Sula's appearance. The most important aspect of this is the birthmark. It's important to note that Sula's birthmark seems both stereotypically feminine (the rose) and stereotypically masculine (the long, phallic stem). The mark's gradual darkening will come to symbolize many things, as we'll see.

Sula and Nel become friends very suddenly when they are twelve, for reasons neither of them can describe. They become friends when a group of Irish immigrants come to Medallion to bully the black schoolchildren. The Irish had moved to Ohio from Ireland, hoping for a land of opportunity. Instead, they found a country full of racists who hated all immigrants. The Irish then tried to prove that they were white, too, by bulling the blacks in Ohio.

Racism often creates an inferiority complex in its victims, and this only results in more racism—as those who are victimized turn against each other, instead of uniting against a common oppressor. Irishmen are mistreated by white Americans, and so the Irish try to prove their own "American-ness" and superiority by mistreating blacks, asserting their place on the totem pole by making sure at least someone is beneath them.

In 1922, four Irish boys come to Garfield to tease the schoolchildren. Sula, who is standing near Nel, pulls a knife out of her coat and points it at the boys. Instead of trying to attack the Irish boys, however, Sula cuts the tip of her own finger, spurting blood everywhere. Sula whispers, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" Sula's tactic works, and the Irish boys run away.

Sula's behavior, much like her mother's, is a subversion of stereotypical femininity. Sula is clearly capable of acts of violence, and she can intimidate older, stronger people. And yet her acts of violence are directed at herself, not really at others. In a way, this is Sula's version of the compromise of life in the Bottom: instead of fighting back against the racism of others, she embraces her own persecution, and finds a way to use it to her advantage.

After scaring away the Irish boys, Sula becomes good friends with Nel. They are adventurous, and love to be distracted by new things—the smell of tar pouring in a road, for example. Sula inspires Nel to disobey her mother's orders—although Nel is supposed to "pull her nose" with a clothespin (something that would supposedly make her nose look prettier as an adult) and straighten her hair every Saturday, Sula convinces Nel to avoid these tasks whenever she can.

Helene seems to want Nel to look as "white" as possible by straightening her hair and trying to pinch her nose. This is similar to Helene's smile in the face of the train conductor's racism—openly submitting to discrimination (in this case racist standards of beauty), and seeming to acknowledge that whiteness is superior to blackness. This might be practically useful in the short term (white people will actually treat Nel better if she looks whiter, or smiles like her mother), but it could have dangerous effects on Nel's inner life. Helene is basically teaching her daughter to be ashamed of her blackness, and thus of her very self—that she would be prettier and even better as a person if she looked different. Sula, then, represents the kind of embracing of blackness that Morrison advocates.

In the summer of 1922, Sula and Nel become conscious that there are "beautiful boys" all around them. They decide to find some "mischief" down by the river, where the boys like to swim. Sula leaves her house to go to the river in the afternoon. As she leaves, she hears two of Hannah's friends, Patsy and Valentine, talking about how they made the mistake of having their children far too early. Hannah laughs and tells her friends that a parent will always love her own children—she just won't "like" them. Hannah then admits to not liking Sula. Sula is shocked by this pronouncement, and runs away from the house.

Sula and Nel's naiveté is ominous, and we know that they're in for more than just "mischief" if they flirt with too many men—especially after the brutal way Ajax referred to them as "meat." This is also an important section because it confirms that Hannah doesn't feel love, per se, for Sula: she's motivated to raise her children by an emotion more akin to duty. Much the same could be said of Eva: in no small part, she raised her children because it was the only thing to do, and she wanted to prove to herself that she could *do it.*

Nel and Sula walk toward the river. They play with twigs and grass and wait for boys to arrive at the river's bank. Before long, they see a boy walking toward the river, picking his nose. Nel yells at the boy, whose name is Chicken Little, to stop picking his nose, and Chicken Little yells backs at Nel to leave him alone. Sula is gentler, and offers to show Chicken Little how to climb a tree. Together, Sula and Chicken Little climb up a tall tree and slide out on the branch. At first, Chicken Little is afraid, but Sula teases him until he's laughing. Nel calls for them to come down, and they climb down the tree. Sula then starts to swing Chicken Little around by his hands as he laughs delightedly. Suddenly he slips from Sula's grip and flies out into the water. To Nel and Sula's surprise, Chicken Little doesn't bob to the surface of the water—he seems to have been lost in the river.

The name Chicken Little, while childish, also suggests a bad omen: Chicken Little was, after all, the character who announced that the sky was falling. So it's tragically appropriate that here it's Chicken Little who falls into the water. Morrison will return to this brief scene again and again (like the moment of Plum's death), studying it from different characters' points of view. Here, it's hard to say that Sula is "guilty" of killing Chicken Little: she's only a child herself, and let go of Chicken Little entirely by accident. But in a broader sense, this scene represents the moment when Sula stops being a child and becomes an adult—that is, a woman with adult pains and worries.

Nel and Sula look nervously at the water. They can't imagine where Chicken Little could have fallen. Frantic, they turn and run to the nearest shack, which belongs to Shadrack. Sula bangs on the door and walks inside the shack, but finds that no one is inside. In the midst of her terror, Sula thinks about everything she knows about Shadrack—he's wild, drunk, and sometimes shows his penis in the street. Suddenly, she hears a noise—Shadrack is standing right behind her.

Sula and Nel went to the river to encounter sexuality, part of "coming of age." And in a way, Sula and Nel do *come of age in this scene, but not in the sense they'd imagined. They're exposed to some of the horrors of adulthood: first the horrors of death and guilt, and here, the horror of sexual predation. Shadrack's intimidating manner frightens Sula—we've seen things from his perspective, but he clearly seems very different in the eyes of others.*

Shadrack has just entered his shack, where Sula is standing. He smiles, and Sula tries to ask him if he's seen what just happened out on the river. Before she can finish her question, however, Shadrack says, "Always." Sula panics and runs outside, back to Nel. Nel tells her "it ain't your fault," and asks her where the belt on her dress has gone. Sula can only shake her head—it seems that her belt came off in Shadrack's shack.

From Sula's perspective, Shadrack has witnessed her drop Chicken Little into the water, and says "always" to mean that he always sees what happens on the river. It's not clear what happens to Sula's belt, as we only witness the scene (for now) from her panicked perspective—we might even think that the traumatized Shadrack is sexually frustrated and tries to molest Sula. Morrison will return to this scene at the end of her novel, and we'll see it in a different way—the word "always," in particular, will show how the interpretation (or misinterpretation) of a single word can shape someone's life.

The narrator describes what became of Chicken Little: a day later, a bargeman on the river noticed Chicken Little's body. The bargeman would have left the body had he not noticed that it belonged to a child. It takes three more days before anyone can move Chicken Little to the embalmer, and by that time, even his own mother can't recognize his body.

Morrison's description of the process of collecting Chicken Little's body paints a dark picture of life in the Bottom. One interesting point is that we're not told if the bargeman is black or white. Assuming that he's white, we can surmise that the white community in Medallion places little to no value on black lives. But if the bargeman is black, Morrison's point is even darker: death and misery are so common in the black community that everyone accepts these things as unchangeable facts of life.

A funeral is held for Chicken Little. The choir sings hymns, and Nel and Sula, both in attendance at the funeral, can't bear to look at each other. Nel can feel that she's going to be arrested for killing Chicken Little at any moment. Sula simply cries. As the funeral proceeds, Reverend Deal, the head of the church, proceeds with a sermon in which he praises Jesus, and reminds his congregation to come together, remembering that most of the families in the Bottom have lost loved ones in tragic ways.

Morrison again shows how a group copes with tragedy and draws closer because of it, as Deal unites his congregation specifically through their shared pain and loss. It's as if being a member of the Bottom means *having lost someone in a horrific way. The danger of this approach to grieving is that it encourages people to lose hope and to think of themselves, first and foremost, as miserable people.*

Chicken Little is buried in the Bottom's cemetery, next to his aunt and his grandfather. Nel and Sula watch his burial, holding hands. They sense that they'll never be able to forget the sound of Chicken Little's childish laughter. Then they turn and walk home, still holding hands.

The chapter ends with Nel and Sula holding hands, but this event with Chicken Little is the tragedy that starts to tear the two apart. They are both haunted by a shared sense of guilt, and this will affect them for the rest of their lives.

1923

In 1923, Hannah Peace walks into her mother's room with an empty bowl and a pile of beans, and asks, quite abruptly, if Eva ever loved her children. Eva has been sitting in her room, yelling at the group of rambunctious deweys outside her window. Eva asks Hannah to repeat her question. Hannah does so, and Eva replies that she doesn't think she ever did. She demands to know why Hannah is asking, and berates Hannah for being so ungrateful to her mother—if Eva hadn't sacrificed her own health and happiness for her children, Hannah wouldn't be alive at all. Hannah is apologetic, and tries to drop the issue. Eva isn't finished yet, though—she tells Hannah a story she's repeated many times, about how in 1895 she fed her three children beets, the only food she could find for them.

Morrison begins her chapter on an abrupt note: it seems that Hannah has been thinking about whether or not her mother loves her for some time (in the previous chapter, we learned that she doesn't love Sula—perhaps Hannah is trying to understand her own feelings by talking to her mother). Eva's answer isn't surprising, despite all the sacrifices she made raising her children and the tortured love she seemed to feel for Plum. Morrison gives the sense that something broader and more complex than just love motivated Eva to raise her children so devotedly: a mixture of strength, revenge, and ambition.

We switch from Eva's perspective to Hannah's. Hannah has filled her bowl with beans. Now, she takes the bowl and asks Eva one more question, "What'd you kill Plum for, Mamma?" Eva is quiet. She remembers long ago, when Plum was only a baby, and very sick, and she had to take care of him by giving up her own food.

It seems that this confrontation scene will not be the only one of the book, as it appears so early and anticlimactically. It is now made clear that Hannah knew from the start why Plum died—and perhaps Eva even knew that she knew.

After a long period of silence, Eva replies to Hannah's question. She says, "He give me such a time. Such a time." Eva explains that Plum never had much desire to be alive—when he was a baby, he almost died, and when he was an adult—just a quiet, overgrown baby—he showed all the signs of wanting to return to Eva's womb. Eva concludes, "I birthed him one. I couldn't do it again." Eva begins to cry as Hannah watches her. Hannah turns and leaves the room without saying a word, and Eva, now sitting alone, calls Plum's name.

Eva's explanation is consistent with the imagery surrounding Plum's death, particularly the cup of blood and water and Plum's childlike, drugged state. Eva couldn't stand to see Plum the addict regressing to infancy: she loved him so much that she didn't want him to go through pain for years, especially because she *would be going through pain, too. It's a mixture of love and selfishness that's stronger than either love or selfishness would be by itself.*

Before Hannah's strange conversation with her mother, another strange thing had happened. The night before their conversation, there was a large storm, during which there was no rain or lightning, but only wind. On Thursday, the narrator claims, Hannah told Eva that she'd had a dream about a wedding, in which she wore a red bridal gown. Hannah's dream, Eva remembers later, was the third strange thing that happened that week.

This section is filled with omens, but we don't know what these things are omens of, yet. Morrison never reveals whether there's anything to these "signs" or not, but the fact that people believe in them—and change their actions because of their interpretation of them—suggests that even meaningless coincidences can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

In the summer of 1923, Sula is thirteen years old, and her **birthmark** is darkening. It is peach-picking season, and the people of the Bottom pick peaches for canning. Another strange thing that happens to Eva at this time is that she loses her comb, and has no way to straighten her hair.

Anything can seem like an omen when one is looking for it. This section again brings up the theme of signs and their interpretations, as superstition is already starting to work against Sula and the community's perception of her.

On the day that she loses her comb, Eva goes to her window and sees her daughter, Hannah, burning. She is standing outside, and her dress is on **fire**. Eva immediately rushes, in her wooden frame, to push herself out of the window, onto her daughter. She pushes herself out and falls to the ground below, twelve feet away from where Hannah is burning. Eva drags herself toward Hannah and tries to cover her body, putting out the flames. Before she can do so, the neighbors, Mr. Suggs and Mrs. Suggs, rush to Hannah and pour a bucket of water on her. Hannah lies on the ground, horribly burned.

We now see what all the "omens" were supposedly predicting. Hannah's death is one of the most ambiguous events of the novel, and it's never explained: whether it was an accident, or Hannah lit herself on fire, or if someone else (even Sula) was involved. In light of this, Hannah's question to Eva has an elegiac tone, and her fate also echoes that of her brother Plum. We see just how far Eva is willing to go to save her daughter from fire (even after killing her other child with fire), Eva's desperate actions show that no matter her feelings of affection (or the lack thereof), she does truly care about her children deeply and fiercely.

A group stands around Hannah as she lies on the ground, screaming in pain. Hannah then whispers, "Help me, y'all." Someone has called an ambulance, but before the ambulance can get her to a hospital, Hannah has died from her burns. After the ambulance drives away, Eva, grief-stricken, crawls off toward the trees. She's bleeding from her fall, so the crowd calls an ambulance to take her to the hospital as well. At the hospital, Old Willy Fields, an orderly, tends to Eva, ultimately saving her life. For the next 37 years of her life, the narrator notes, Eva would curse Willy for saving her, and she would have continued cursing him afterwards, except that by then she was 90, and too old to remember what had happened.

Morrison jumps around with the timeline, to dazzling effect. Here, she flashes forward more than four decades to show us that Eva continues to live a long life. We begin to realize that Eva isn't actually that old in the 1920s, even if she is one of the oldest people in the community. Eva already killed one of her own children, but somehow, she couldn't stand to have another one die for reasons beyond her control. In a way, control has always been Eva's goal (this is oddly similar to Helene, though the two women go about gaining control in totally different ways)—Eva is willing to sacrifice her own body to tend to her children, because doing so gives her a sense that she has purpose and can control her own life. To live without this purpose is agonizing for her.

Eva lies in her hospital bed, trying to understand what has happened. She remembers Hannah's dream of a wedding, and notes that weddings always mean death to her. The red gown in Hannah's dream symbolized **fire**, clearly. Finally, Eva remembers seeing Sula standing near Hannah's burning body—"just looking." When Eva tells her friends about Sula, they say that this is natural—Sula was probably struck dumb by the sight of her own mother burning. Eva, however, secretly believes that Sula was "interested" in watching her mother burn.

As soon as we understand one mystery—why Eva killed Plum—another one unfolds in front of our eyes: we don't understand exactly what happened with Sula. Even if there is some truth in the omens of Hannah's death, Morrison suggests, there is so much unexpected tragedy in the Bottom that interpreting omens is a never-ending process. Sula's strange fascination with Hannah's burning body is another kind of "sign" that can be interpreted in different ways—and it starts to alienate Sula from Eva and the rest of the community.

1927

The year is 1927, and there is a great dance going on in Helene Wright's house in the Bottom. Old folks dance with children, and everyone seems to be drinking. Helene Wright, who now walks with a cane, drinks until she's tipsy. Nel, her daughter, has just been married, and Helene has invested all her strength and intelligence in planning the wedding. Now that the wedding party is underway, she's too weary to care about rules or plans anymore—as a result, she does nothing when guests spill alcohol on the carpet or scratch the drapes.

The last chapter ended on a note of weary finality: Eva giving up after losing two of her children. We sense the same tone in this chapter: Helene has spent her entire life trying to control her environment, and now, at her greatest moment of triumph, she can't enjoy her own control. It's as if she's past the prime of her life, and is going to spend her remaining years in a state of exhaustion.

Helene has arranged for her daughter to be married in an actual church—a very expensive wedding, and thus rare in the Bottom. The groom is a handsome, popular man named Jude Greene. He's a singer in the choir, as well as a waiter. Jude wasn't in any position to get married (he didn't have enough money to take a wife), but it was announced that a new road, the "**New River Road**" would be built, and Jude thought that he could get work there. (The narrator notes that ten years later, the New River Road still isn't completed.)

The New River Road is like a will-o-the-wisp, always tempting the people of the Bottom to run toward a supposedly bright future. And yet, as the narrator cynically steps back and reveals, the road is also something of a lie: it's still not completed ten years later, even though people seem desperate to begin working on it.

The narrator continues to describe Jude Greene. Jude longs for a challenging physical job—he wants to work on the **New River Road**. He also craves the camaraderie of working alongside people who are like him. He even has ambitions of developing a limp during his time on the road—a limp of which he'll always be able to say, "Got that building the New Road." Even though Jude doesn't succeed in getting work on the road, his ambitions compel him to get married to Nel. Jude imagines growing old with Nel—as he tells himself, "The two of them together would make one Jude."

We see the extent to which the New River Road has gripped the minds and souls of the people of the Bottom: Jude is willing to essentially base his life around the road. Jude even looks forward to developing a limp—another instance of the people of the Bottom embracing pain and misery, and making it a natural part of their lives. Jude's ambitions seem especially tragic once we learn the truth about the New River Road—it is another trick whites are using to exploit the people of the Bottom.

In the months leading up to his marriage, Jude thinks about what Ajax had told him at the Pool Hall: all women want to die for their men. Now that he's newly married, Jude believes this to be true of Nel—she's very gentle, and submits to him at all times. Jude notes that when he was wooing Nel, he was struck by how close she was with Sula. Nel and Sula acted as if they were one person, not two. In this way, Jude was able to flatter Nel by paying attention to her and only her.

In this section, Morrison establishes a tension between heterosexual relationships like the one between Nel and Jude, and close female friendships, like that between Nel and Sula. In this book, at least, neither *kind of relationship is ever complete and fulfilling: too much time spent with Sula, for example, makes Nel want to compete with her, and so she is more eager to find a husband.*

At the wedding party, a dance begins. The deweys—still one solid unit—dance together. Though they're now adults, they're only about four feet high—they've mastered the art of continuing to *think* like children, and so they still look like children. Meanwhile, Nel and Jude think about making love that night—they're both ready to go. Nel looks into Jude's eyes and smiles. Out of the corner of her eyes, she can see Sula walking away. The narrator notes that it will be ten years before Nel and Sula see each other again, and when they reunite, their meeting is "thick with birds."

We begin to see the power of naming in a new way. In Morrison's semi-fantastic (and almost magical realist) world, being named a certain name can define one's life. The deweys never grow up because they cling too tightly to each other, and can never break apart into individuals. Much the same is true of the community of the Bottom: there's no sense of maturation or growth over time, because the people of the Bottom cling a little too tightly to their own misery and pain. The bird imagery that ends the chapter again brings up the idea of bad omens, especially as associated with Sula.

1937

It has been ten years since Sula last saw Nel. Sula has just returned to Medallion, and for some reason, she's accompanied by a "**plague of robins**." Sula is dressed "like a movie star," attracting the stares of the old men who sit on their porches and whistle at any woman who passes by. Sula walks to Eva's house, and finds Eva sitting outside. Eva stares at Sula in more or less the same way she stared at BoyBoy the last time she saw him—with pure hatred.

The "plague of robins" is another perceived omen, and shows how the people of the Bottom interpret a seemingly natural phenomenon to mean that Sula is evil or somehow bad luck. Morrison also alludes to the Biblical plagues described in the Book of Exodus—as if Sula is bringing divinely ordained misery and sadness with her. Sula's outsider status in the town is plain from the way Eva—the resident "namer" and representative of the Bottom's culture—glares at her.

Eva peppers Sula with questions as soon as she sees her. Eva wants to know when Sula is going to settle down—when she's going to get married. Sula replies that she has no interest in marriage—Eva finds this "selfish." Sula quickly becomes annoyed with her grandmother, and repeats a rumor she heard long ago: Eva cut off her own leg under a train to collect the insurance money—Eva, Sula claims, has sold her life for "23 dollars a month." Eva is furious with Sula for bringing this up. Sula hisses that she'll soak Eva with kerosene and **burn** her to death one day. The narrator notes that in April, Eva would be carried away from her house in a stretcher (though he doesn't explain why), and Sula would become the legal guardian of Eva's children and grandchildren.

The first sign of a distance between Nel and Sula appears when Sula refuses to answer Nel's questions right away. This is similar to the way that Plum refused to talk about his time after the war, and we fear that Sula has changed for the worst. Another sign of Sula's changing loyalties comes when she sends Eva out of her own home. This seems to be unambiguously heartless: Sula is punishing Eva, seemingly for no reason. (We'd been expecting something closer to the other way around: Eva lashing out at Sula.)

In May (after Eva has been taken away), the "**plague of robins**" has flown away. Nel believes that things have gotten better in the Bottom because of Sula's return after 10 years. Nel is still a great admirer of Sula's: she thinks that Sula has to power to bring joy and humor to almost any situation. At this time, Nel has been married for a decade, and her love for Jude, her husband, has faded somewhat in that time. Yet whenever Sula visits Nel and Jude now, Nel's love for Jude grows.

In spite of some tension, Nel and Sula seem to still be good friends, despite not talking for a decade. Again, we see a tension between heterosexual love and same-sex friendships (at least in the environment of the time and place, where women are encouraged to compete for men's attentions). Here, the tension has reversed: Nel has become a little tired of her marriage, and now turns to her girlfriend for happiness.

Sula reunites with Nel, and makes a point of stopping by to see her in the afternoons. Nel notes that Sula's **birthmark** has grown darker in the last decade. One afternoon, Sula visits Nel, and they laugh and reminisce about a boy who didn't know how to have sex, and wound up ramming his crotch into a girl's hip. Nel laughs heartily, as if for the first time in her life.

Sula's birthmark is another ambiguous sign, like the plague of robins. In one sense, the birthmark may symbolize Sula's growing maturity: as she accumulates more and more experiences, both good and bad, the mark gets darker and more "worn."

Nel asks Sula to tell her about the last decade of her life—Sula hasn't written or called at all in that time. Sula explains that she went to college, but Nel protests that Sula obviously wasn't in college for ten years—all Nel knows is that Sula was in Nashville for some time (Nel had asked Eva, who gave a largely incoherent answer). Sula turns Nel's questions back on her—she points out that Nel has changed a great deal in ten years. Sula also tells Nel that she's arranged for Eva to be taken to a nursing home in Beechnut, Ohio, where she'll supposedly be cared for. Nel is shocked. She reminds Sula that the women in the nursing home are insane—Eva may be strange, but she still has a working mind. Sula confesses the truth: she got rid of Eva because she was afraid. She explains that Eva **burned** Plum to death, and claims that she witnessed this. Nel isn't sure what to think—Sula has never lied to her before.

Sula's journey out of town is different from the other characters' journeys: she went to educate herself. Morrison doesn't linger on descriptions of Sula's education. We should note that Sula was able to go to college because of Eva's money, meaning that Eva has sacrificed her own happiness for her family's betterment once again. (This makes it especially shocking that Sula sends Eva off to a home as soon as she's back in town.) It's unclear if Sula is lying about being present for Plum's death—if she was there (Morrison does mention "some child" crying immediately after Plum's death), or if she is simply repeating what her mother told her and is using it as justification for sending Eva away. Either way, her proclamation adds to the strange, supernatural, and sinister aura developing around Sula.

Sula continues telling Nel about Eva's family situation. After Plum and Hannah died, Eva collected large amounts of life insurance, some of which paid for Sula's college education. Sula and Nel agree to try to send money to Eva to ensure that she's well taken care of in Beechnut.

We see where Eva gets her money: she's collected insurance money, turning her misery and her family's pain into cold, hard cash. It's ironic that Eva, who's cared for others with this money all her life, will now be the one the money provides for—even against her will.

Before Sula and Nel can say anything more, Jude arrives—he's home from work—and greets his young children. Jude looks exactly the same as he did a decade ago, except that he now has a thin mustache. Jude greets Sula and tells her and Nel about his bad day—a whining customer argued with him. Nel is about to comfort Jude when Sula pipes up—she says that Jude has a perfectly good life, and shouldn't be ungrateful for it. Everyone in the world envies a black man, Sula explains—even white men want to cut off black men's genitals, and if that's not respect, she concludes, she doesn't know what is. At first Jude is irritated with Sula for interrupting Nel, and imagines that her birthmark looks like a snake. But then he begins to laugh at her humor, and starts to notice that Sula is an attractive woman.

There's a dark side to Jude's unchanging appearance. He's still young and good-looking, but he also hasn't matured or progressed in life: he's still blindly hoping to find work in the New River Road, even though it seems likely that no work will ever come. We might compare Jude's unchanging appearance with that of the deweys: the tragedy and lack of opportunity in the Bottom "freezes" these characters in their current states, symbolizing their tacit acceptance of the status quo. Jude's interpretation of Sula's birthmark as a snake is important as well: the snake first seems like something evil or ugly (as Jude is angry with Sula at the time), but it is also phallic sign that could represent Jude's immediate attraction to Sula. On another level, snakes symbolize the temptations of sin (i.e. the snake in the Biblical Garden of Eden story), foreshadowing how Jude will soon "sin" by having an affair with Sula.

The narrator jumps ahead, saying "He left his tie." As the passage begins, Nel is frantically trying to convince Jude to remain married to her. She reminds Jude that they've been married for ten years, and have raised children together (the narrator doesn't mention their names). She demands to know how Jude could leave him when he's known her so well for so long.

Morrison begins this section with another ambiguous sentence. We quickly come to see that Jude is leaving Nel, but we don't understand why just yet. The irony here is that Jude, who'd seemed to be an unchanging character, is changed as soon as Sula comes into his life—seemingly right after their first conversation.

The narrator reveals that Nel has caught Jude having sex with Sula one afternoon. When Nel catches them doing this, she sees Jude pulling on his clothes, with his genitals hanging out for a split-second. Nel also sees that Sula and Jude seem completely comfortable with one another. Nel feels Jude looking at her—the same way the veterans looked at Helene years ago, on the train to New Orleans. Jude and Sula walk out, and Jude turns and tells Nel that he'll be "back for his things" later.

In less than two paragraphs, Morrison establishes that Jude is attracted to Sula, and then shows Jude and Sula having an affair. Jude walks out on Nel, just as BoyBoy walked out on Eva years and years ago. (Note also that the manner in which Nel catches Sula and Jude mirrors the way that Sula saw Hannah having sex one afternoon, years before.)

Nel sits alone in her house, having just discovered that her husband was having an affair with her best friend. She goes to sit in her bathroom—the smallest and least comfortable room in her house. She remembers something Sula told her long ago—"The real hell of Hell is that it is forever." Nel realizes that Sula is wrong—the real hell is constant change. One day, Nel thinks, she'll be alone: life changes so quickly that she can never be completely happy.

Here Morrison makes explicit some of themes of change and constancy that she's been alluding to lately. While most of the people in the Bottom have accepted that nothing will ever change in their lives, Sula seems to believe that change is possible, and that change has to be better than stagnancy. Even if Sula betrays Nel, she's also rebelling against the status quo of sadness that has gripped the Bottom for years.

In the coming months, Nel grieves for her husband's sudden absence. Her children—two boys—ask her to sleep with them one night, because they've been frightened by the movie they saw. Nel is glad to do this. She thinks about whom she can go to in order to talk about her sadness, and her mind jumps to Sula—then she corrects herself: Sula is the woman Jude left her for.

In her grief, Nel turns to her children for happiness, much as Eva turned to childrearing to fight off her own grief when BoyBoy left her. Nel instinctively still wants to be close with Sula, and has to remind herself that they should be enemies now. Nel gives up the friendship for the sake of her principles, and because of the idea that for a woman, a relationship with a man is the most important thing in life.

Nel tries to understand what she's supposed to do with the rest of her life. In her time of need, she tries to turn to Jesus, but doing so doesn't make her feel any better. She thinks that she would gladly spend the rest of her life in hard physical labor, if only it meant that she could find another man to be with.

Nel has been taught that her life is incomplete until she finds a man to settle down with—as we've seen, she's been conscious of this fact at least since the age of twelve. She can't shake off this way of thinking, despite any evidence to the contrary.

1939

Word gets out that Eva is being sent to a nursing home, and people learn that Sula is responsible for sending her grandmother there. This information—along with the knowledge that Sula slept with Nel's husband—makes Sula despised in the Bottom. People remember the **plague of robins** that accompanied Sula's return to the neighborhood, and conclude that the robins were a bad omen. The townspeople also mention how Jude Greene has left Ohio and moved to Detroit, where he never sends letters to his family.

The people of the Bottom don't really understand what they're interpreting, but their interpretations still affect their actions. All they know is that something has changed now that Sula is in town, and therefore Sula must be bad. This reminds us of how enthusiastically the people have embraced the status quo in all its flaws—they're afraid of change (perhaps because in the past, change has usually been for the worse).

In the coming months, Sula begins to have regular "accidents" and misunderstandings. One day, a child named Teapot knocks on her door to ask if she has any bottles. When Sula says that she doesn't, Teapot trips and falls down the stairs. In the coming days, Teapot's mother blames Sula for pushing her child down the stairs. She sends Teapot to the hospital, where she learns that Teapot has a fracture. Teapot's mother is so angry with Sula that she responds by becoming a model parent—always clean and hard working.

Ironically, hatred of Sula becomes a way for the people of the town to bond with one another, and to become "better," more moral people. This is, unfortunately, a pattern repeated throughout history: a community chooses a scapegoat, and becomes closer as a result. Even before Sula's arrival, the people of the Bottom had formed a strong community with one another, based in no small part on their pessimistic acceptance of their own grim lot in life.

Sula has other misunderstandings with the people in the Bottom. One day, an old man named Mr. Finley is sitting on his porch, eating chicken, when he chokes on a bone and dies—and Sula is blamed for this. The townspeople also make up other stories about Sula—it's said that mosquitos don't bite her, that she doesn't belch when she drinks, etc. A woman named Dessie reports that she saw Shadrack tip his hat to Sula, in response to which Sula smiled and curtseyed. This, the town concludes, means that both Sula and Shadrack are wicked people.

The links between Sula and evil become more and more tenuous, proving to us that the people of the Bottom are desperate to blame their troubles on some external force. Sula, like Shadrack, is misunderstood because she is different. This isn't to say that she isn't guilty of some pretty awful things—but the townspeople aren't judging her for these things. Instead, they're blaming her for nonsense like a man choking on food.

The townspeople come to believe that God has sent Sula to do evil in the Bottom. For the time being, they decide not to do anything about this, since the purpose of evil is to be withstood, in demonstration of faith. Nevertheless, the people of the Bottom gossip about Sula's evil—she betrayed her closest friend, Nel, ruining her life with lust.

The townspeople don't try to get rid of Sula's "evil"—or, in other words, they don't actually try to change *things in the Bottom. This is partly because they need Sula's evil to define themselves as good: they need a scapegoat they can hold themselves up against, and point at as the "bad guy."*

The narrator switches to describing Sula's experiences during her ten years away from the Bottom (before returning and sleeping with Jude, etc.). Sula travels to Detroit, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Macon, and San Diego. She only returns to Medallion because she misses Nel—and because she becomes bored with travel. In the cities where she travels, she finds all the people to be the same: hard-working, sweating, etc. Her only interactions in these cities are sexual. The narrator notes that if Sula had known how to make art—to paint or dance—then she would have found an outlet for her frustration. But instead, Sula can only bounce from one sexual partner to the other, never finding the relief she craves. Sula continues to sleep with men because she craves sadness. Her favorite moment of sex is the moment after, when her lover turns away from her and she can be alone with her feelings.

Morrison contrasts the narrow-mindedness of the neighborhood's view of Sula with the richness and depth of her own life. Sula has been traveling around the country in the hope of finding something new*—new people and new experiences. But she only finds that people are essentially alike all over, especially in the way that they try to distract themselves from their own misery. For her part, Sula turns to sex as a distraction and to find purpose—perhaps explaining why Sula tries to sleep with her best friend's husband. There's no joy in Sula's actions—she just tries to make peace with her own self, and fails every time.*

Sula then comes back to Medallion and immediately makes the acquaintance of Ajax, the same man who called her "pig meat" 17 years before. Ajax is now 38, working as a milkman, and Sula is 29. Ajax visits Sula at her house regularly, always offering her gifts—ice cream, berries, and, of course, milk. Surprisingly, Ajax is very courteous to Sula—and to other women in the Bottom. The narrator notes that Ajax is kind to the women in his life because he had learned to behave this way around his mother. Ajax's mother was a resourceful woman who delighted in performing acts of magic and predicting the weather with spells. Ajax was civil with her, and in return, she let him do whatever he wanted.

Based on his earlier appearance in the novel, we'd assumed that Ajax was a crude man who mistreated women. And yet here we find that the opposite is the case: Ajax is remarkably respectful of women, mostly because his mother has taught him to behave this way. This isn't to say that Ajax "understands" women—beginning with his own mother, women have an air of mystery for him, which he is unable to grasp. But Ajax is at least intriguing and sensitive in a similar way to Sula herself.

The narrator continues describing Ajax. He loves only two things in the world: his mother and airplanes. Ajax takes long trips to big cities, and most people assume it's because he's giving himself elaborate vacations, but actually Ajax just likes to fly in planes because he dreams of working on an airplane one day. In the ten years of Sula's absence, he had heard many stories about her, and how she was famously elusive and unpredictable. Thus, when Sula returns to town, he can't resist paying her a visit. Ajax suspects that Sula will be just like his mother: uninterested in other people, and thus uninterested in having sex with him.

Ajax and Sula aren't so different: they both have lofty ambitions of change and escape. Ajax channels these ambitions into his love for airplanes: a symbol of escape if ever there was one. Ajax's fascination with Sula is in part the fascination of one dreamer with another. Paradoxically, Ajax is attracted to people who aren't attracted to him—he respects those who, like him, want to find something new in their lives.

Eventually, Sula does decide to sleep with Ajax. She's been charmed by his gifts, but the real reason that she sleeps with him is that he "talked to her," and seems genuinely interested in what she thinks. Ajax was always a good listener, the narrator notes: he had lots of practice, growing up with five siblings and a mysterious mother.

Sula is attracted to Ajax for the simplest and most clichéd of reasons: he respects her and is interested in who she is. It's worth thinking about rare this is in the novel: Helene, for example, is attracted to Wiley Wright because she wants stability in her life, not because she finds him to be a sensitive or understanding man.

Once, while Sula and Ajax are having sex, Sula imagines that Ajax is made out of gold. Beneath the gold, she thinks, there is alabaster, which gives him his powerful frame. Beneath the alabaster, she imagines, there is loam and soil. She then dreams of giving Ajax the "water" he needs to moisten his soil.

In this surreal, beautifully written section of the novel, Morrison gives us a metaphor so rich and complex that after a certain point it stops being just a metaphor for anything. There are a few important things to note about it, however. One is that Sula fantasizes about "understanding" Ajax, finding a connection so intimate that she literally gets "under his skin." Two, Sula imagines Ajax in a symbolic language more commonly reserved for women. (Ajax is the "soil" for her seed, not the other way around, as in the typically gendered metaphor.)

One afternoon, Sula and Ajax meet, and Ajax mentions the disappearance of Tar Baby. Tar Baby has been arrested for public drunkenness and sent to jail. Ajax went to the local jail, where he tried to convince the jailers to let Tar Baby change his clothes. Because the jailers—like Eva—regarded Tar Baby as a white man, they refused to let him change, saying that a white man shouldn't be living among blacks if he wants to be "clean." Sula feels herself growing attracted to Ajax. Ajax explains that he'll need to fly to Dayton to see an air show soon. They make love, and afterwards Ajax bids Sula goodbye.

Morrison doesn't let us forget that the people of the Bottom live in the constant shadow of the oppressive whites in Medallion (and in the larger shadow of the white supremacy inherent in the U.S. government and society at the time). Once again, Sula's attraction to Ajax seems tied to Ajax's refusal to accept the status quo: he wants to save a man from pain and humiliation, while everyone else condemns him. And yet Ajax, just like BoyBoy or Jude, leaves Sula when faced with commitment and responsibility. There's a limit to the close connections between men and women in Sula*: they are always imperfect, and never last long.*

In Ajax's absence, Sula tries to find more information about Ajax. She finds a copy of his driver's license, which he's left at her house. She learns that his real name is Albert Jacks (A. Jacks—"Ajax"). Exhilarated, she imagines the gold in Ajax's flesh, and the alabaster beneath it. After this, Sula falls asleep. In her dream, she tastes "the acridness of gold... the chill of alabaster and... the dark, sweet stench of loam."

Sula's fascination with Ajax seems tied to her understanding of the origin of his name. "Ajax" is a famous warrior from Greek mythology, and yet here this figure emerges from a relatively boring, common name: Albert Jacks. Morrison ends the chapter on a lyrical but ominous note: whenever a character goes to sleep in this novel, something bad is in store. Here it is hinted at by the "acridness of gold," i.e. the dark side of Ajax. We can sense that Ajax and Sula will never see each other again.

1940

The year is 1940, and Nel has heard that Sula is sick. She decides to visit Sula (who is still in her house) and offer her help to her old friend. It's been three years since Nel has seen Sula—she hasn't been able to force herself to look at the woman who slept with her husband.

Sula's affair with Jude has destroyed both her own friendship with Nel and Nel's marriage to Jude—and these rifts have lasted for decades. We can't help but wonder just what kind of purpose Nel has found in her life, in the absence of both Jude and Sula.

Nel thinks about how her life has changed in the last three years. To support herself and her children, she's had to work as a maid, in addition to collecting the seaman's pension her parents still live on. She's thirty years old, and is taking care of herself. She's even had time to be with her children, who are still in school.

Nel seems to have grown into the very image of her mother. Like Helene, she devotes herself to her children, and tries to fill her life with a sense of order and careful control.

Nel stands outside Eva's old bedroom, staring at Sula. She asks Sula—just as she's rehearsed many times—if there's anything she can do for her. Sula immediately replies that Nel can pick up her prescription from the drugstore. As Sula speaks, she can feel pain building up inside her—the painkillers she's been taking for her illness just aren't that effective.

The "lateness" of Nel's scene with Sula is made clear right away. Nel has rehearsed her question many times already, and Sula seems to be past the point where medicine can do anything to save her life. The two women have been putting off this confrontation for a very long time now.

Without saying anything, Nel walks out the door to pick up Sula's prescription. As soon as Nel leaves, Sula exhales. She enjoyed sending Nel off to run errands for her—especially because the drugstore is located exactly where the old ice cream parlor—where she and Nel used to go—once stood. Sula wonders why Nel came to see her, and wonders if Nel came to gloat at her pain. She remembers protecting Nel, years ago, from the Irish boys. Even though she hurt her own finger, Sula thinks, her actions earned Nel's disgust, not her admiration.

Sula is no saint, even if she's no demon, either. She seems to enjoy manipulating Nel into doing her bidding, and giving her painful reminders of their old friendship. But even in these cases, there's an element of friendship in Sula's behavior: she's trying to bring Nel back to the place where they first became close with each other. Sula's efforts seem to come too late, however, as by this point, she's already decided that she and Nel are too different to be close again. Nel is obsessed with control and order, the very things Sula rejects.

Sula hears Nel coming back from the drug store. Nel enters Sula's room and pours her medicine. Nel asks Sula what's wrong with her. Sula says that there's no point in talking about it. Nel suggests that Sula would be happier in a smaller place, where someone could take care of her. Sula laughs and says that Nel has forgotten what kind of person she is. Nel, getting frustrated with Sula's arrogant manner, yells out that Sula isn't a man—she's can't keep pretending that she's independent. Sula tells Nel that at least she "sure did live in this world," and "at least I got my mind."

The differences between Sula and Nel become clearer in this scene. In a way, both friends have found their own ways to make peace with the world. Nel adopts a strategy of rigid control, while Sula continues searching for freedom and independence, even if doing so involves hurting other people. Sula refuses to embrace the self-hatred and pessimism that infects the rest of the Bottom. This pessimism is obvious when Nel berates Sula for acting like a man: in Nel's mind, women have no business trying to be free or curious. Sula, however, has no patience for such a view.

Nel, still standing over Sula, angrily brings up Jude. Sula laughs and claims that she never really cared about Jude—she tried to never care about a man. Nel demands to know if Sula cared about *her*—if she knew how her actions would ruin her old friend's life. Sula pauses, and then says, "I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" Sula adds that, although she's hated in the Bottom for now, the people will come to love her one day. Nel, disgusted with Sula, turns to leave. She says, "I don't reckon I'll be back."

Sula's question, "If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it?" has a grain of truth in it. As we're coming to see, Nel always resented Sula in some ways—in spite of their friendship, there were always big differences between the two women, differences which Sula's affair made apparent, rather than caused. Sula also shows an awareness of her conflicted role in the community: she is hated, and yet this common hatred of her makes her crucial to the stability of the town.

Nel steps outside Sula's house. She walks through the neighborhood, noticing that nobody else seems to be outside. Back in her room, Sula takes more medicine. She falls into a delirious sleep, during which she dreams about the Clabber Girl Baking Powder lady (the beautiful white mascot for the popular product). In her dream, the lady breaks up into a fine dust, which feels coarse and painful against Sula's body.

We're reminded of how heavily Sula's personal insecurity is shaped by the racism of American society. Sula, like most American minorities, has been taught that whiteness is the only standard for beauty or success. Sula has tried to rebel against these directions, but doesn't know what to put in their place. Unlike even the other people of the Bottom, she has no strong community to support her: she's always tried to figure things out for herself, moving from one lover to the next. In the end, however, Sula's aspirations to freedom and independence collapse into "dust."

Sula wakes up and finds herself staring at the window—the same window out of which Eva jumped years ago. She then turns her head so that she can't see the window. Suddenly, Sula realizes that she's no longer breathing. Yet she doesn't feel any need for oxygen—she's dead. Sula smiles—death "didn't even hurt." Her last words (or thoughts) are, "Wait'll I tell Nel."

In a way, Sula has always "turned away from the window"—in other words, avoided commitments to other people, especially to her family. In one of the most overtly "magical realist" parts of the book, Sula speaks from beyond the grave. Morrison doesn't describe this event as fantastical or even particularly unusual—and it's especially telling that Sula still immediately thinks of Nel as her closest confidante, despite their years of separation.

1941

News of Sula Peace's death spreads across the Bottom quickly—in fact, it's the best news the town has heard since the announcement of work on the **New River Road**. A polite funeral is held for her, but secretly the townspeople are relieved that she no longer lives in Medallion. They promise themselves that nothing will ever keep them from loving God.

Morrison begins the chapter on a note of bitter irony, which is appropriate for the chapter, as the news of the New River Road turned out to be crushingly disappointing (it'll never be completed). The people of the Bottom are glad that Sula is gone, and yet her presence in the town was also "useful," as it united everyone else and encouraged them to behave morally.

At the same time that Sula dies, it's announced that the builders of the **New River Road**—a project that which has been deadlocked for years—will finally accept black labor. This is exciting for the people of the Bottom, as they're sure they'll get new work opportunities. Another strange piece of news reaches the Bottom: renovation work is being done on the nursing home where Eva now lives. The home is made to be brand-new and up-to-date.

The death of Sula seems like a good omen at first, especially regarding the New River Road—or at least it seems so to the people of the Bottom. They're so accustomed to interpreting signs to fit their biased outlook that they're grateful for such a seemingly unambiguous piece of good fortune immediately after Sula's death.

The pattern of good news in Medallion ends abruptly in October of 1940, when a drought hits the area, killing many crops. In the fall and winter, there's so much snow that men and women can't go to work, meaning that the town becomes much poorer. There is a general sense that "something is wrong" in the Bottom. The people become angrier and sadder. Teapot's mother becomes so angry with Teapot that she beats him—causing him just as much pain as he felt when Sula supposedly knocked him down the stairs. Many other mothers—who had previously defended their children from Sula—now begin beating their children.

The "signs" from the universe become more and more ominous, and suddenly Sula's death doesn't seem like such a good thing after all. The point here isn't that God is punishing the people of the Bottom for their wickedness—the point is that omens only gain power and meaning when people give them power and meaning. Sula's death proves how important she was to the community: when she's gone, families become crueler.

Christmas in 1940 is a sad affair—many of the people in the Bottom are sick. On January 3rd, 1941, Shadrack is walking through the streets as usual, celebrating **National Suicide Day**. And yet this January 3rd is different for him. For the first time since he fought in World War I, he begins to crave human contact. Because he has no friends, he savors the one symbol of human contact in his shack—a child's belt, which a little girl gave him years ago.

In this fascinating section, we're brought all the way back to the chapter in which Chicken Little died—an event that none of the characters have discussed for a long, long time. It's as if the new misery in the Bottom has inspired Shadrack to change his own outlook on life. We also see the strange way he experiences the passage of time, and just how important his brief interaction with Sula (a frightening encounter for Sula herself) was for the lonely man.

On the afternoon of January 3rd, Shadrack thinks about the little girl whose belt he owns. The girl (whom we know to be Sula) had a "tadpole" in her eye (her **birthmark**). To comfort the young child, Shadrack said, "Always"—meaning that the girl need not worry about the changes of her face. The girl seemed to feel better because of what Shadrack said. When she ran away, she left behind her belt, which Shadrack kept. Shadrack then sees the "little girl" years later, when she's died. Shadrack curses his fate—whenever he meets a friend, the friend is taken away from him.

We realize what happened between Sula and Shadrack on the day Chicken Little died: Shadrack took Sula's belt for himself. (Morrison deliberately made this unclear in the earlier chapter.) The birthmark on Sula's forehead—the final proof that Sula was the "little girl" Shadrack remembers—can be said to look like anything: a rose, a snake, or a tadpole. It's like a Rorschach inkblot test (a psychological test where patients look at ambiguous inkblots and describe what they see), revealing more about the interpreter than the mark itself. Sula's error was to think that Shadrack was talking about Chicken Little's death when he said "always"—in reality, he had no idea what happened to the child, and was only trying to comfort Sula. Sula has been misinterpreting Shadrack's words for years, and this seemingly simple misunderstanding has had huge repercussions for her entire life. It's also interesting to note that to Shadrack, the last forty years or so seem not to have happened at all—he thinks of Sula as having "just" become his friend, and laments that she is then "immediately" snatched away from him.

On the afternoon of January 3rd, Shadrack is surprised to find that he has "friends": people who actually want to join his informal celebration in the street. The deweys, Tar Baby, Valentine, and dozens of other people in the Bottom run out to dance with Shadrack, and laugh and cheer for **National Suicide Day**. Some, like Helene Wright, refuse to join in, and watch the parade with scorn.

All along, the people of the Bottom have accepted Suicide Day, but now their acceptance has spilled over into actual celebration: they're celebrating *the misery of their own lives. This was the danger of life in the Bottom all along: acceptance of sadness was always in danger of becoming the* celebration *of sadness. And yet there is also something beautiful about this scene—at some point, the only thing to be done might just be to embrace one's misery—and even make light of it—as long as that misery continues, and so much of it is out of one's control. It's also poignant that the lonely Shadrack suddenly finds the human connection he's been craving.*

Amazed, Shadrack leads his parade through the city down Main Street, toward what has been built of the **New River Road**, the road tunnel that will one day lead across the river. Together, he and his followers look in silence at the tunnel. The sight of the tunnel affects the townspeople in a profound way. Here, in front of them, is the engineering project for which they've made enormous sacrifices in the last thirteen years. Whenever doctors have refused to come to the Bottom, or whenever businessmen come to collect extra rent, the explanation has always been the same: the extra money is needed to build the New River Road. Now, it's plain to everyone that the project is a myth. It's not even half-built, and there are no signs that anyone has worked on it for years.

Since the novel's start, we've been given hints that the white establishment in Medallion is still cheating the Bottom. Now, we see exactly how: the whites have been depriving the black people in the Bottom of their health care, their heating, and their happiness by promising them that they're going to get a bridge one day. This is, of course, a lie: the establishment in the Medallion doesn't care about the bridge at all. The New River Road has always been a way to keep black people weak yet hopeful—miserable, but not quite miserable enough to make trouble or upset the status quo.

One by one, the people of the Bottom react to the sight of the **New River Road** in the same way. They pick up rocks and bricks, walk to the cliff where the tunnel is supposed to end, and hurl their missiles at the abandoned project, screaming with hatred and frustration. Suddenly, there's a loud "crack." To throw the bricks, the townspeople have had to get very close to the edge of the cliff, and with the extra weight the edge of the cliff collapses. Dozens of people fall into the water and die: the deweys, Tar Baby, Dessie, Valentine, and some of Ajax's brothers. Only a few of Shadrack's followers survive. Shadrack himself stands in the cold January air, amazed at what he's just witnessed.

In this tragic, almost fantastical scene, the black people of the Bottom unleash the rage they've been feeling for most of their lives. And instead of directing their rage back at themselves or at each other (as they usually do), they direct it at the symbol of their own manipulation and persecution: the bridge. Tragically, however, even this becomes a self-destructive act: unwittingly, the people of the Bottom kill many of their own in their attempts to lash out at their white manipulators.

1965

The narrator begins, "Things were so much better in 1965. Or so it seemed." Over time, black people in Medallion gain more wealth and power for themselves—they begin holding better-paying jobs with more responsibility. New roads and nursing homes are being built constantly, using black labor. Some of the young people in the community look like the deweys (who died in 1941 in the bridge collapse). Nel, who still lives in Medallion, thinks about all the "beautiful boys" around her in the 1920s. Now, forty years later, the beautiful boys are gone—everyone seems uglier to her.

Over time, the black community in the U.S. gains more rights and more money. But there's still a persistent sense that nothing has really changed: blacks are still second-class citizens and looked down upon by the white establishment. This lack of change is here reflected in Nel herself—she's still thinking about beautiful boys, just as she did forty years before. More money hasn't made anything essential change, and in fact she misses the old days.

Nel thinks of Eva—still confined to a nursing home, thanks to Sula. Nel considers the facts: it's true that Eva is mentally unstable, but it can't be true that she needs to be turned over to the nurses.

Even as we come to the close of the novel, it's just not clear why certain characters do certain things. We might want to think that Nel is going to see Eva out of sympathy and love, but we should also consider Nel's need to control and rationalize everything: she might just be trying to make sense of the events of her life.

Nel, now fifty-five years old, considers her life. Her three children are fully-grown now, and take up little of her time. After Jude left her, she tried to remarry, but nobody would take her, since she had three children. Nel still loves her children, but she believes that her children increasingly ignore her.

Nel's life is getting emptier and emptier—she's losing all connection with her children, or at least believes that she is. It seems that she never gave up on the belief that she could only find true fulfillment with a husband.

The narrator notes that the Bottom has virtually disappeared. The black families that used to live there have used their new wealth to move closer to the valley, where they're closer to the Ohio river. Ironically, the white families that, 100 years ago, believed the hills of the Bottom to be inferior to river land, have now changed their minds. Now whites live in the hills, looking down on the valley, and blacks live near the river: exactly the opposite of what used to be the case. This is sad, the narrator notes, because the blacks in Medallion have lost their sense of community in the Bottom.

Morrison shows the absurd arbitrariness of racial hierarchies in America, as the hills switch from being undesirable land to being highly desirable land—all because of the race of the people living there. In the process of all this, the black people not only have to switch locations, but they also lose their old sense of community. Morrison has been highly ambiguous about how much this "sense of community" is worth—is it a refuge from racism and pain, or is it a way for people to accept tragedy as inevitable, and so avoid having to change anything? Perhaps it's both.

Nel finds that she can't stop thinking about Eva, and decides to visit her in her old folk's home in Beechnut. She arrives at the home one afternoon. The building itself is luxurious and beautiful, but Nel notices that the rooms inside are small, like cages. On the third floor, Nel finds a room marked, "Eva Peace," and goes inside.

In the world of Sula, *black women are essentially born in cages and die in cages. Although they try to go out and explore the world in between, they're often returned to small, claustrophobic community spaces, where they don't have the freedom to be themselves.*

Inside Eva's room, Nel finds Eva, looking very different from her former self. She seems to have shrunk, and her remaining leg is wrinkled and gray-colored. Nel introduces herself as Nel Greene—to Nel's surprise, Eva correctly remembers Nel as "Wiley Wright's girl," and then demands, "Tell me how you killed that little boy." Nel is shocked—Eva wants to know about Chicken Little, the little boy who drowned years ago.

Morrison has essentially told the story of Sula *as a series of ambiguous, tragic events—Plum's death, Chicken Little's death, Hannah's death, Sula's betrayal of Nel—and then has shown how these events continue to resonate through people's lives for years. Chicken Little's death hasn't come up in a long time, but it's clearly been on the characters' minds for years.*

Nel tries to explain herself to Eva. She insists that it was Sula who killed Chicken Little, not her. Eva laughs and says, "What's the difference? You was there." Eva tells Nel that she's been talking to Plum, who tells her things about the living and dead. Disturbed, Nel walks out of the room, ignoring Eva's calls.

Nel, trying to preserve her own sense of self-righteousness, instinctively blames Sula for Chicken Little's death. Morrison doesn't bother to correct or verify Eva's statement about Plum speaking to her from the grave—it's just one of those vaguely fantastical elements of the novel that could hypothetically be explained, or could truly be something supernatural.

Outside the nursing home, Nel pictures Sula, swinging Chicken Little and then letting go of him. It occurs to her that Eva has a point: Nel *was* watching when Chicken Little fell. Furthermore, Nel remembers feeling a "good feeling" when Sula's hands slipped. For years, Nel had been proud of her calm, controlled behavior—as a result, she was secretly happy whenever Sula's wildness and energy got her in trouble. As Chicken Little's body fell into the river, Nel felt joy, she remembers: the joy of knowing that she—Nel—was good, and Sula was wicked.

Nel herself only now seems to realize the true source of what she's been feeling guilty about for all these years. In the moment when Sula let Chicken Little slip from her hands and drown, Nel felt happy—happy that Sula had made a mistake, thereby proving that she, Nel, was the "good" one in their friendship. Nel has always felt distanced from Sula, and now we come to understand the truth: she ended her friendship with Sula not only because of Sula's affair with Jude, but also because there was always that element of competition and jealousy in the women's relationship, and Nel never truly felt comfortable with it.

Nel walks away from the nursing home toward a nearby cemetery. There, she finds the graves of the Peace family. As Nel scans the names of the people she's known for her entire life, she feels that she's not looking at dead people, but only words. For years, Nel had believed that she, and she alone, understood Eva—even understood why Eva refused to attend Sula's funeral. Nel believed that Eva had refused because she couldn't bear to watch "the swallowing of her own flesh." Now, Nel believes what everyone has always said about Eva: that she's a mean, spiteful old woman.

At the close of the novel, Nel changes her view of Eva, in what seems to be yet another tragic misunderstanding of a complex, ambiguous character. Nel seems to be casting Eva as a villain because she can't stand to face her accusations about Nel's complicity in Chicken Little's death, but as usual there is an inexplicable element to Nel's pessimistic conclusion. It seems more likely that Eva's fear of watching "the swallowing of her own flesh" was more of the reason for why she killed Plum than for why she didn't attend Sula's funeral. It's assumed that Nel and Eva will never meet again, and so Nel will never reach a better level of understanding for the old woman.

Nel remembers the day of Sula's death—she was found in Eva's house, with her mouth wide open. When the neighborhood found out about Sula's death, some people cheered and danced. It was Nel who called the doctors to take Sula away—no one else could be bothered. Then, at the funeral, Nel was the only black person present. The only other people there—the gravediggers—were white.

Nel seemingly never forgave or reconciled with Sula before her death, but their strong bond was also never broken—Nel was the only one to arrange the details of Sula's funeral and go to it. Nel now fears dying alone and unmourned just as Sula was.

Nel tears herself away from the Peace graves, and walks back to her home. As she walks in the road, she passes by Shadrack, who is still dirty and scruffy. As Nel passes Shadrack, Shadrack has the strange sense of having seen Nel before. But "the act of recollection was too much for him and he moved on."

We see how far apart Nel and the rest of her community have grown, as Shadrack remembered Sula when he saw her body, but this isn't the case with Nel. Morrison leaves us with yet another poignant image of misunderstanding and lost connection here.

Nel continues walking, thinking about Shadrack. Suddenly, she stops at the edge of the forest near the cemetery. Staring up at the trees, she whispers, "Sula?" Nel then admits the truth: for years she's believed that she misses Jude, but in reality, she's been missing Sula, her oldest, best friend. Nel cries Sula's name again and again. The book ends, "It was a fine cry, loud and long, but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.

The tragedy of Nel's life is that she's been taught that she needs *to find a husband—that she can only be happy if she finds a man and has children. And yet the search for a husband hasn't brought her any happiness, and has only left her feeling frustrated and purposeless. The only relationship that seemed to bring Nel real happiness—her friendship with Sula—is gone now, thanks to years of betrayal and jealousy. This final scene, however, is a kind of reconciliation for the two—as Sula died thinking of Nel, and Nel finally seems to forgive Sula—but only of the most tenuous and unsatisfying kind. There is no "moral" or "happy ending" to Morrison's plot, just an account of various tragedies, relationships, and misunderstandings—events circling outward and never truly resolving.*

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