

# Morrison's Exploration of Morality Within the Anti-Community Framework

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In the majority of Morrison's novels, the portrayal of black communities is positive, but in *Sula*, the community is depicted as fractured and antagonistic. Within this anti-community narrative framework, Morrison conducts a literary experiment, delving deep into our familiar notions of family and morality. This paper thoroughly examines Morrison's anti-community setting in her novels, analyzes the reasons and internal dynamics of such communities, and identifies the conveyed perspectives on family and morality within specific contexts.

*Keywords:* black communities, anti-community, family, morality

## Introduction

Toni Morrison is the first black female writer in history to be awarded the Nobel Prize. Her novels primarily depict African-American life, with a particular focus on themes revolving around black women and communities. *Sula*, published in 1973, is one of Morrison's early novels, not lengthy but filled with surprising and unconventional plotlines. The academic community has extensively studied the novel from various angles, providing a rich diversity of perspectives.

The main characters in the novel are black women, making feminism an important topic of research. D'Ésiré (2016, p. 11) believed that "these women want to assert their equality with men, make their rights recognized and show that they are as competent and intelligent as men". Pokharel (2020, p. 122) shared a similar view, stating that "the novel deals with how Sula breaks away from the pale of patriarchy to live a life of personal choice and freedom". The friendship between Nel and Sula is closely intertwined with the expression of the novel's themes, as Shovon (2022, p. 62) examined it "as a means of creating and recreating identity against the backdrop of society".

Domestic scholars have conducted in-depth and comprehensive research on the novel. Sun Chao (2020) focused on the male characters in the novel and interprets the diminishing masculinity of African-American men. Du Zhiqing (2003) explored the themes of death and postmodern narrative features in *Sula*, highlighting Morrison's work's profound depth and innovation.

While many scholars have studied this early work extensively, providing unique insights and discussions on the issues within the African-American community depicted in the novel, they have not thoroughly pointed out the distinctions between this community and those in Morrison's other works or explored other themes using Morrison's community framework. This paper delves into Morrison's anti-community setting in the novel,

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analyzing the reasons and dynamics behind such communities while elucidating the conveyed perspectives on family and morality within specific contexts.

### **“Black Community” in Morrison’s Eyes**

In Morrison’s novels, the setting is often during the era of racial segregation or the civil rights movement. During this time, white people hold absolute dominance, subjecting the black community to discrimination and oppression. Within such communities, black individuals emphasize the importance of cohesion, mutual assistance, and support, with invisible bonds connecting every person. The community serves as a place for preserving and perpetuating their historical and cultural traditions, while also acting as a collective shield against white oppression. Families form the fundamental unit within the community, and love and responsibility within families are essential components of the community’s spirit. One of the significant responsibilities within the community is maintaining and supporting each family.

For instance, in *Beloved*, when women in the community hear of the tragic experiences of the Sethe family, they unite spontaneously, coming to her house to pray, sing, and attempt to drive away the haunting ghost through traditional African rituals. This novel explores “the necessity of communal participation for individuals with the relation of others within the Black community” (Koh & Kwak, 2021, p. 8).

In *Song of Solomon*, the connection between family heritage and black history becomes intertwined, gradually revealing the cultural transmission and value system within the black community. Through her positive portrayal of black communities, Morrison indicates the path to “building the confidence of Black people, rediscovering oneself, and the roots of Black culture” (Lai, 2019, p. 55). This involves “confronting the past, recognizing the value of one’s existence, and completing the process of self-reconstruction, thus entering the historical and cultural sequence of the Black community” (Lai, 2019, p. 55).

### **The Anti-Community Depicted in *Sula***

The discussion of the anti-community in this text does not oppose the existence of communities, nor does it diminish their value. Instead, it no longer solely praises the positive role of communities in uniting black strength and providing spiritual and physical belonging for black individuals. Rather, it presents the darkness and chaos within the community. There is no embellishment of the black community; it more truthfully portrays the survival conditions of black individuals in the early 20th century. In *Sula*, Morrison changes the conventional way of writing about the black community. The community in the novel is fragmented, filled with conflicts between individuals and individuals, individuals and groups, and groups and groups. The traditions valued by the black community, the spirit of unity, family emotions, and community ethics, have all been betrayed.

The novel begins with Shadrack’s memories of war trauma. On the battlefield, individuals cannot control their own destinies. Soldiers struggle to distinguish between advancing and retreating, let alone predict their own life or death; they are in a state of complete passivity. In the community of *Sula*, individuals also cannot fully grasp their destinies. On the surface, most people in the community live in comfort, no longer enslaved. However, invisible rules constrain the entire group, limiting individual freedom.

The novel opens with the origin of the name of the community “Bottom”, which, while presented as a joke, carries a bitter and ironic undertone. A white farmer gives a difficult task to a black slave and promises him freedom and a piece of “lowland” upon its completion. However, after the slave accomplishes the task, the farmer distorts the truth by calling the land on the hilltop the “bottom of heaven”. The novel describes it as: “Freedom

was easy—the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land" (Morrison, 2004, p. 12). Considering the historical context of the story, it becomes apparent that although black individuals gained freedom, the narrative power of society's operation was still held by white individuals. The notion that "giving Black people freedom is an easy task" reflects white arrogance. While the liberation of slaves became a reality, even with newfound freedom, black people lacked sufficient means of sustenance and production. Their community found it difficult to flourish.

The novel does not extensively delve into portraying the oppression faced by the black community at the hands of white individuals. It instead highlights a few specific instances, each of which carries significant symbolism. Apart from the initial farmer-slave joke, there are other illustrative examples: Boyboy's dwelling being named by his white employer's name, Helene facing reprimand from a white train conductor, and the tunnel company's preference for hiring white immigrants over local black individuals. The oppression of slavery manifests in various aspects of black individuals' lives and work, encompassing every facet imaginable. This all-encompassing discrimination and oppression inevitably lead to the estrangement of both individuals and groups within the black community.

The novel portrays "lower-class Black men as impoverished, absurd, morally disoriented, and alienated" (Sun, 2020, p. 23). Boyboy is promiscuous and abandons his wife and child. Jude is in a constant state of despondency and ultimately also abandons his family. The portrayal of other men is similarly negative: They betray their wives, disregard family responsibilities, and indulge in the idyllic world created by Eva, Hannah, and Sula. When confrontations arise between white and black individuals, black men are often at the forefront. White male supremacy is deeply ingrained and dominant, subjecting black men to immense discrimination and oppression. The resulting sense of defeat from oppression leads to the decline of black male pride and their subsequent alienation. On one hand, to cope with their negative emotions, black men sometimes project their oppression onto their families, making black women victims as well. The phenomenon of male alienation inevitably manifests in women too. While most women in the community adhere to tradition and their traditional roles, there are cases like Hannah, who prioritize their sensual pleasures over their children's emotional growth. Moreover, once black women find an outlet for their emotions, they might spread the oppression they experience in a malicious way. Upon Sula's return to the town, her promiscuity, indifference, and lack of community conformity swiftly make her an outcast, with most of the animosity directed towards her coming from other women. As Morrison stated, workplace violence, competitive violence, emotional violence—the violence that happens between women, the intent to dominate other women, the eroding of dignity among women in the workplace, all of these things give me the shivers. Morrison believed that sometimes, in comparison to racial discrimination, the oppression of women by men and the struggles between women could be more destructive. Sula seeks self-discovery through her relationships with men, but the rejection and hostility from women in the community make it difficult for her to establish herself there.

The impact of slavery on black people is profound. While they hold onto and look back at their racial and cultural traditions, they are forced to accept the washing of white values, leading to a lack of continuous, independent values, causing confusion in their self-identity. When facing white oppression, the cohesion and common consciousness within the black community weaken, leading to a blurring of moral values. Without the moral regulation of oppressing others, the desire to oppress one another is unleashed, resulting in mutual oppression and confrontation among the black community. Such a community deviates from the positive image of the black community depicted in traditional black literature, but it did exist in American history or may still

exist today. Morrison's attitude towards this is undoubtedly critical, as evidenced by the disaster that befalls the community in the novel's ending.

### **Good and Bad: The Complexity of Characters in Morrison's *Sula***

The success of the novel also lies in the portrayal of its characters, with each major role being a "round character with complex personality traits and a sense of authenticity" (Du, 2003, p. 35). Each person is difficult to describe using simplistic labels of good or bad. Eva respects community traditions, possesses a Sisyphean spirit in her struggle against fate, has a charitable heart by adopting orphans and providing a refuge for the homeless, yet the determination and cruelty she displayed in killing her own son cannot help but send a shiver down one's spine.

Morrison's portrayal of the embodiment of "good" and "evil" in Nel and Sula is subtlest and thought-provoking. Eva's frank statement to Nel: "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (Morrison, 2004, p. 166). "Together they set about a single complete individual: Sula the impulsive, emotional one; Nel the practical one" (Nigro, 1998, p. 727). They complement each other, contributing to a unified whole. Sula is the adventurous one who seeks education, while Nel remains in their hometown. Their identity is derived from their close relationship, the complementary nature of their emotional traits, and their shared identity as black women. In an era still grappling with the aftermath of racial segregation, the forms of life for black women may differ, but they share a common bond of fate.

What's noteworthy is the dialectical nature of good and evil within both characters. Nel has always been seen as a good woman in the community—loving her husband, nurturing her children, and taking on the responsibility of providing for her family after being abandoned by her husband. However, when a little chicken falls into the water, she remains surprisingly composed as she witnesses Sula's helplessness. Nel believes Sula's killing has nothing to do with her and takes secret pride in seeing the formerly protective Sula now vulnerable. Her callousness and selfishness are exposed by Eva, leaving nothing hidden from the readers. On the other hand, Sula is filled with destructive actions—hurting friends, betraying family, and breaking up others' families, making her seem wicked. But from an overall perspective, she is not purely evil. Her impact on the community is not entirely negative. Koh and Kwak (2021, p. 12) discussed Sula's "evil" role, stating, "Although Sula brought unity to the village by being a public enemy and symbol of immorality in her lifetime, after Sula's death, the communal unity of Bottom lost power". Nel has always played the role of a virtuous wife and mother, and in her younger years, she was a good mother. As her children grew up, she became dedicated to community welfare work. However, when she visits Eva at the nursing home, she is met with a cold reception. While Sula engages in all sorts of evil deeds, her heart is tormented after killing the little chicken. She also contributes to harmony among people in the community and fosters harmony in families.

The novel profoundly explores the complexity of human nature, showing that good intentions may not lead to good outcomes, and malicious actions may not result in bad consequences. Evil lurks within the depths of human nature, but "evil is not an alien force; it is merely a different force with its own rationality and should not be obliterated" (Wilfred & Clenora, 1990, p. 34). The real issue is how to control and balance this "malevolence" from becoming "evil deeds".

In portraying these characters, Morrison cleverly reveals their multi-dimensionality and contradictions, prompting readers to resonate and contemplate. By depicting the complexity of their personalities, readers can delve deeper into the essence of human nature and the diversity of society.

### Conclusion

This article discusses the anti-community setting in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* and explores the unconventional elements of family ties and good and evil within this context. Morrison portrays the fragmentation and conflicts within the black community, highlighting the complexity and contradictions within it. White oppression serves as the root cause of the community's disorder, while the lack of cohesion and moral restraint among black individuals also contributes significantly to the situation. Morrison's writing experiment challenges traditional community narratives and offers a profound and unique reflection morality. In the novel, betrayal coexists with genuine love within family bonds, and good and evil are not mutually exclusive. These dialectical considerations make *Sula* a novel that combines philosophical depth with artistic brilliance.

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