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**TONI MORRISON'S SULA:**  
**Individuality as the driving element in the development of the society**

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I hereby declare that this diploma thesis, titled “Toni Morrison’s Sula: Individuality as the driving element in the development of the society”, is the result of my own work and I used only the cited sources.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis proceeds from the Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* and it mainly concentrates on a mutual relationship between an individual and society as reflected in the book. It consists of two main parts. The first one describes some aspects of the African-American history; the second one focuses on the individual characters in *Sula* and analyzes the Bottom society, charted against principles of US society in general. Individuality as the basic point of this thesis is shown as the moving element in the development of the society that also gives the direction of that development. Relationship between an individual and society is considered dialectic – on one hand, particular individuals participate in the development of the society, destroy stereotypes and violate dogmas; on the other hand, these people are often subdued and limited for the sake of the proper functioning of the society. Primary basis of this work is an assumption of the necessity of individual driving elements in the society for its (social) ceaseless development and subjectivism as the basic point of view on human existence.

**Key words:** human being, gender, race, society, subjectivism, womanism.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato diplomová práce vychází z románu Toni Morrisonové *Sula* a soustředí se na vzájemný vztah jednotlivce a společnosti. Skládá se ze dvou hlavních částí, z nichž první se věnuje některým aspektům americké černošské komunity a druhá jednotlivým postavám zmíněného románu. Tato část popisuje také vztahy mezi těmito a dalšími postavami v rámci Morrisonovou popisované černošské komunity Bottom na pozadí zákonitostí tehdejší americké společnosti. Základním východiskem práce je člověk jako individualita se všemi možnými aspekty své osobnosti, podílející se na vývoji společnosti a udávající její směr. Vztah mezi jedincem a společností je zde nahlížen dialekticky – na jedné straně jsou to konkrétní individuality, které se podílejí na vývoji společnosti a jejich posunech, bourají ustálené stereotypy a narušují dogmata, na druhou stranu jsou právě tyto jednotlivci tlumeni a limitováni ve jménu správného fungování společnosti. Primární tezí této práce je předpoklad, že jedinec jako podněcující element je nezbytný pro společnost a její neustálý vývoj. Převládajícím a trvalým pohledem na lidskou existenci zůstává subjektivismus.

**Klíčová slova:** člověk, pohlaví, rasa, společnost, subjektivismus, womanism.

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# 1. PREFACE

This work focuses on artistic reflections of the African-American society in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and on the circumstances and context that preceded the time of Jim Crow laws. It shows the position of African-American men and women within their own community, which is itself customarily subordinated to white Americans, and their attitude toward some of its own individuals. It does not draw its conclusions from documentary literature of fact, but chooses to analyze one artistic (writerly) embodiment of the above topic - the relationships between several characters in the novel *Sula* by the Nobel Prize winning African American writer Toni Morrison and the position of both distinctive and ordinary individuals within the Bottom community described therein.

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison puts emphasis on the ambiguity of good and evil and she mainly deals with this motif within the relationships between people who live in one neighborhood. Another motif that seems to be crucial for the novel is a mutual relationship between a larger group of people and individuals who somehow appear in the social periphery thanks to their otherness. It shows how people react to these individuals as well as how these individuals understand the people. The story is full of biblical resonance; some of the characters often appear in a direct relation to biblical ones (Eva), others represent the lively reference to biblical stories (*Sula*, *Shadrack*).

This thesis consists of a partial outline of the history of social arrangement in America and of the literary analysis of the relationships among the particular characters of the Bottom community. Some of the characters crucial for the thesis are first described individually and then set in the larger context; that part describes their personalities, lives and events seen from their points of view. Then the thesis mainly deals with the characters of *Sula* and *Shadrack*; it analyzes their position in the community and their contribution to the social development and changes. As the title of the thesis says, main focus is put on the developing relationship between the Bottom community and its individuals.

Historically, the developing relationship between society and its citizens has belonged to the realm of sociologists, comparative jurists and historians of law. The early modern Western trajectory of thought is embodied by Henry Maine and Karl Marx through Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. For the purposes of this work, we shall use some of

Durkheim's theses as the general background against which to chart our observations drawn from the reading of Morrison's *Sula*.

As following, to deal with the thesis and its topic, it seems to be suitable to outline partially what the society is and how the position of its particular individuals appears. For the same reason the very first part of the thesis deals with some historical context and general background of the development of feminism (especially Black feminism). Yet, the work remains primarily a literary analysis and all aspects touching on sociological, gender and feminist subjects become described and mentioned because they seem to be necessarily explained to properly understand the characters in *Sula* and their actions.

As is generally known, a society is a group of people related to each other through persistent relations and sharing the same geographical place. It consists of the individuals who determine its current and future forms and ideas; it is a complex set of thoughts, religions and miscellaneous feelings, which come true by means of these individuals (Durkheim, *Sociology* 75). The individuals participate in the development of the society, no matter if their involvement is active or passive, and they create its real and final picture. The relationship between an individual and society is considered mutually interdependent because none of them might even exist if not being conditioned by each other. Each individual with his/her part contributes to the creation of the common result. Individuals' private feelings become public and social only by their mutual combination, which is created in a human community. Society is that which thinks, feels, and wants, although it can want, feel and do only by means of individual minds (Durkheim, *Sociology* 40). Thus, no society can be defined without regard to its particular individuals and no individual separately from the society he/she lives in. Moreover, though the individual's contribution to the social development can be both active and passive, each individual represents an element that instigates this development. Thus everybody seems to participate in the final picture of the society and as such is considered a driving element of the social development.

In that way this thesis explores the mutual relationship between the society and its individuals as it is shown in *Sula*, the second novel by a much-acclaimed African-American writer Toni Morrison. It proceeds from the point that people cannot possibly want to leave the society and simultaneously remain human; it shows that the society

consists of the contribution of its individuals and as such cannot be separated from them and vice versa. There is no question if an individual can live out of the society but in which society he/she wants to live (Durkheim, *Sociology* 70).



## 2. AMERICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN SOCIETY

### 2. 1. African-American women

Given the fact that this thesis deals primarily with the quasi-sociological material provided by Morrison's novel *Sula*, it is reasonable to start with an eclectic historical background to the topic, namely a brief introductory passage dealing with African-American history, particularly as seen through female gender prism.

Morrison's Bottom is a mostly African-American community in Ohio that is situated in the hills above the mostly white and also wealthier community of Medallion. The Bottom becomes a community when a farmer gives it to his former slave who was promised to get a bottom land as a reward for performing some difficult chores. The whole deal turns out to be a trick when the master finally gives the slave a hilly and poor land. He told him that what he considered the bottom still remains that because "when God looks down, it's the bottom. It's the bottom of heaven – best land there is" (Morrison 5). Later, the Bottom grows into a community and place full of liveliness, though its beginning is based on a bad joke and paradox which quite aptly epitomizes the situation of African-Americans under the Jim Crow laws. They were free but subordinate because they remained unprotected by the laws that deliberately favored the interests of white Americans' and as such they often became a target of similar jokes and cruelty. After some time the Bottom people face a situation in which white Americans from Medallion demand their land back to build a golf course on it. What used to be called the Bottom once becomes known as a suburb; people with their houses and stories disappear, some move out and some die.

The Bottom community is characteristic of mistrust that comes of long-lasting superiority of white people and their unfair behavior to the African-Americans. The Bottom people seem to be humble but strong, they share the hatred towards the emblematical white enemy and that makes them unified. On the other hand, they appear weakened because they consider themselves victims, they pity themselves deeply, and similarly to their white superiors, they assume the feeling of superiority towards different or, in their understanding, powerless members within their own community.

Before the Bottom changes into the golf course, numbers of unique stories take place in there. The main one seems to be a story of Sula and Nel, the two women who grow up together but drift apart when they become adult. Nel stays in the community, gets married and raises a family; Sula (Hannah's daughter and Eva's granddaughter) leaves the town, goes to a college and gets to know a city life. When Sula comes back, she sleeps with Nel's husband and their close friendship melts away for a long time. Sula gradually comes to be perceived as a burden by the Bottom community. She makes people nervous because she differs from them and provokes them by her lack of conformity which (in the eye of the Bottom beholder) verges on insanity. For the people she is a witch, a devil, and in that way she becomes connected with Shadrack, another person from the Bottom who largely influences the community life and who is, by the people, considered a devil too. The novel describes how people behave towards those who do not fit their own ideas of suitable and common behavior and how far they are able to get in their effort to accustom themselves to these people. It also shows how the not-fitting people influence lives of the rest.

Sula and Shadrack are two characters in *Sula* that seem to be the most significant examples of tension coming from the mutual relationship between the society and its individuals, though the manifestation, basis and final result of their acts substantially differ. Shadrack is a World War I veteran, whose exclusion from the Bottom community finally changes into the full adoption of his inner rules and their integration to the other people's lives. Sula is a woman whose presence in the community arouses a wave of concern and touches almost everybody's life without exception. Both these individuals represent a kind of attempt to participate in the final picture of the society in which they want to live. Shadrack constitutes the National Suicide Day which means his personal contract with Death but which eventually becomes a common ritual for the whole community and Sula provides a mocking mirror image to the community as a person who has willfully decided to follow her needs. As already said, for the community they both become devils, at least at some point of the communal development.

Within the context of Sula's character in particular, it seems to be necessary to describe the situation and circumstances in which the history of African-American people developed. In connection with the main female characters in *Sula*, the following text will

focus mainly on the African-American women; however, it is not possible to avoid the history of Americans and African-Americans as such.

### **The “other” adultery and its progeny**

Barbara Omolade in her book *The Rising Song of African-American Women* begins her first essay with these words: “Sexual history of the United States began at the historical moment when European men met African women in the “heart of darkness” – Mother Africa. They faced each other as conqueror and conquered: African women captives were considered the sexual property of the European conquerors. The African sexuality confronted by European men was an integral part of a sensuality that permeated music, dance, and religion. [...] The African woman who faced the European man was a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, nestled in tribal societies and protected by fathers, husbands, and brothers who upheld the sanctity and primacy of marriage and motherhood for women. Nevertheless, in the hip-shaking, bare-breasted women with sweating bodies who danced to drums played by intense Black men, in the market women and nursing mothers wrapped in African cloth, in the scantily clad farming women, the European men saw a being that embodied all that was evil and profane to his sensibilities. He perceived the African’s sensual ways according to his own cultural definitions of sex, nudity, and blackness as base, foul, and bestial. He did not attempt to understand how Africans defined their own behavior. He made assumptions and invented knowledge about their behavior as he created the conditions for this ‘knowledge’ to become reality” (3-4).

White men would continue to “plunder Africa for five centuries and they created a world view centered around the myth of race and racism that upheld white supremacy and the total domination of the African-Americans. Simultaneously, the extremes of American patriarchy, particularly under slavery, pushed Black women outside traditional patriarchal protection; thereby transforming all previous definitions of womanhood, particularly the idea that woman requires male protection because of her innate weakness and inferiority” (Omolade 4-5). Black women have been able to show their strength, though they were oppressed and exploited not only sexually but also as the workers and people in the broadest meaning of the word. They would support their men and even consider their own sexual exploitation less important than the racial oppression as such. “Black women speaking with many voices and expressing many individual opinions have been nearly unanimous in their insistence that their own emancipation cannot be separated from the

emancipation of their men. Their liberation depends on the liberation of the race and the improvement of life in the Black community” (Omolade 17). That point, as one of many, distinguishes the basis of later Black feminism from the white one.

## **2. 2. Under the yoke of slavery**

For the purpose of this work it is important to describe some gender aspects of the African American history to understand properly the people’s lives in the United States and within the context of this thesis in the Bottom community. As a group and individuals, Black men and women were forced to face impacts of both political and social oppression established by the white Americans. Their everyday troubles caused by the white supremacy had an inevitable impact on each of them and it influenced all aspects of their personalities.

Under slavery, for white American men Black women were nothing more than laborers, sexual objects and the bearers of new slaves. And “although all women were slaves under patriarchy, the particular enslavement of Black women was also an attack on all Black people. All sexual intercourses between a white man and a Black woman irrespective of her conscious consent became rape, because the social arrangement assumed the Black woman to be without any human right to control her own body. And the body could not be separated from its color” (Omolade 7-8).

There was no possibility to follow the structure of two-parent families for the African-Americans in slavery times. As slaves they had almost no legal rights and because of being variously sold there was also very low chance to establish the family and sustain it for longer time. Therefore, “after the Civil War, black men and women married each other in droves, giving their unions legitimacy and validating their right to choose and love each other” (Omolade 13).

During the slavery, “most slaves lived, not on large plantations, but in small isolated agricultural units where they were in close daily contact with their owners and often worked side by side with them” (Lerner 5). Black women were sexually abused regularly and repeatedly. They delivered babies of their master, overseers, and their sons; they became the third in two-person white marriages. “To a great extent, Black women forced

into sexual relations with white men were still considered suitable mates by black men. There was the widespread practice of Black men parenting children not sired by them, even when a child's father was white. Nearly every black family had a white absentee father or grandfather and a wide range of skin colors. Only those women who continued to live outside the sexual code, which condemned adultery and promiscuity with white or black men, were viewed as sinful" (Omolade 15).

"White men were politically empowered to dominate all women and all Black men and women" (Omolade 5). Within the context of white absentee fathers, white American women were forced to accept their husbands' sexual attitudes without question. "A white woman married to the planter/patriarch endured, suffered, and submitted to him in all things. White women, though viewed as pure and delicate ladies by southern myth, had to serve their husband/masters as did the female servants and slaves; managing the household, entertaining the guests, overseeing the feeding and clothing of both slaves and relatives. Both white and black women were physically weakened and often died from birthing too many of master's children. To be a white woman in the antebellum South meant accepting the double standard: brothers, fathers, and mates could enjoy sex with her sisters in bondage, Black women. White women, however, were prevented from enjoying sex because they were viewed as pure women incapable of erotic feeling" (Omolade 9).

Interracial marriages and single-mothering was forbidden and the people who broke the rules were strictly punished. "In 1662 the Virginia legislature penalized the unmarried mother indenture servant by requiring an additional two years of service, regardless of her race. However, by the 1690s the treatment of Black and white mothers differed. Eventually, Black women slaves or servants were not punished for bearing children fathered by white men, while white women servants were punished for bearing children fathered by Black men. "A woman servant who had an illegitimate [sic] child by a Black or mulatto was fined by 15 pounds and if unable to pay was sold for 5 years after her time of service expired" (Higginbotham, 1978, p. 45). If the unmarried mother was a free white woman she was also "subject to a 15 pound fine or 5 years of service." In 1664 all marriages between the races were prohibited and interracial couples were banished in 1691 statutes. By the 1792, whites were penalized by imprisonment if they married a Black person. But interracial relationships between white men and Black women servants

and slaves were commonplace and existed outside the laws. In fact, English traditional precedent was broken in the 1662 statute which required that “children got by an Englishman upon a Negro woman shall be bound or free according to the condition of the mother” (Omolade 26).

### **2. 3. Black and white women**

Both Black and white women found themselves under the power of white men who created the law according to their personal and self-profitable needs. Moral principles were weakened in order to favor one part of the society that had determined itself as the superior one. At the background of this situation, with no regard to race, feminist movements through the whole female part of American society began to appear.

According to Émile Durkheim, we are not obliged to submit to moral principle obediently and in some cases, we can even feel legitimate to revolt against them. In fact, it may happen that we would come to the conclusion that it is our duty to revolt against – in our opinion – obsolete moral principles and that the most effective would be to refuse these principles not only theoretically, but also through our own acts (Durkheim, *Sociology* 75). Therefore, if a woman is penalized for the sexual intercourse with a man and he is not because of his establishing the law that protects him, there is obviously something wrong and it seems necessary to refuse that. “The sexual exploitation of women of a subservient class is as old as class society and the sexual abuse of slave women by their masters antedates class society and can be found in every culture without regard to race. It is, in fact, one of the very definitions of female enslavement” (Lerner 150).

Nevertheless, black and white women had different possibilities to resist the given system and therefore the development of their struggles also varies. “In a system such as slavery, survival for the oppressed group was the greatest form of resistance. By role-playing and flattery, by cunning, intelligence and, often, passive resistance, the slave struggled to uphold his/her interests against those of his master. Carelessness and thievery, shamming illness and spoiling of produce and tools, mistreatment of the masters’ cattle and property are the frequent complaints of slaveholders which indicate how widespread slave resistance was. Slave women took part in all aspects of resistance. There were also many

slave mothers who worked for years, or even decades, to buy their freedom and that of their children” (Lerner 27).

## **2. 4. Othermothering and single mothers**

One of the impacts of selling slaves and thus breaking their families was that African-American women devoted themselves to their children. “If for some reason the children’s biological parents were unable or unwilling to discharge these obligations, then it was incumbent upon some other member of the community to accept the responsibility. This acceptance of responsibility for the welfare of non-blood related children in the community is hardly unique to the African-Americans. While western conceptualizations of mothering have often been limited to the activities of females with their biological offsprings, mothering within the African-American community and throughout the black diaspora can be viewed as a form of cultural work or what Bernice Johnson Reagon calls “the entire way a community organizes to nurture itself and future generations” (Reagon, 1989: 167-180). Thus, othermothers can be defined as those who assist blood mother in the responsibilities of child care for short- to long-term periods, in informal or formal arrangements. They can be, but are not confined to, such blood relatives as grandmothers, sisters, aunts, cousins or kin. The concept of othermothering has its roots in the traditional African world-view and can be traced through the whole institution of slavery” (Busia and James 44-45).

“Because racism permeates and transcends all social relationships, economic and political arrangements such as slavery, segregation, and desegregation have not operated in the public arena alone, but have seeped into the private arenas of sexuality, marriage and family, and into the personal lives of Blacks and whites, men and women. The history of Black single mothers and their families is part of the history of American family life” (Omolade 21). Within the context of what has been already said, the African-Americans developed and tried to sustain their relationships face to face with the humiliation of the white supremacy enacted by law. Therefore Black single-motherhood was also a “viable family type which Black men and women adopted in response to a system which did not recognize their right for a legal marriage and family. Within a slave community, single-mother families coexisted with outlawed two-parent families. After emancipation, during Reconstruction and during the segregation era, Black single-motherhood continued to

provide a survival strategy for Black families still relegated to second class citizenship and social marginality by racism, apartheid, pogrom and poverty. In each era, Black single-motherhood has been interwoven both with Black estranged and nonresidential fatherhood and the emasculated patriarchal status and power which has accompanied the social death of Black men. The sexism of the ruling elite is not only directed at women; it is also aimed at stunting the development of Black manhood, whether it takes a patriarchal or non-sexist form” (Omolade 22).

## **2. 5. Black men and women**

African-American men under the slavery were unable to protect their women fully, which also influenced the later development of gender system within the African-American community. “Protecting Black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy. Black men felt outrage and shame at their frequent inability to protect Black women, not merely from the whippings and hard work, but also from the master/lover’s touch. During and after slavery, Black men spoke out angrily against the harsh treatment of Black women, many vowing never again to allow Black women to be sexually abused and economically exploited. Their methods often became rigidly patriarchal; however, they did many instances keep Black women from becoming the open prey of the white man” (Omolade 13).

“Patriarchy as such is a system which requires control of women’s fertility and sexuality in monogamous or polygamous marriages and is based upon a sexual division of labor regulated by male chauvinism. In terms of worldwide historical consideration, the patriarchy at one time was perhaps a human attempt at arrangement in which women and children had protection and stability. The patriarchy has persisted, in part, because women gain from their relationships with men: as daughters, wives, mothers or sisters. In African societies, women had social recognition as members of the society. They had social and political rights and responsibilities. They had the right to join women’s societies, which often shared birth control and sexual information. Women’s bonding was a recognized part of the society. The men were also in a social relationship to women in which male domination had limits and responsibilities. The advent of slavery changed these basic relationships because the traditional patriarch, the Black man, lost his status



and economic and political power, which included wardship and protection of his women” (Omolade 25).

Despite the slavery and later segregation, African-Americans mutually supported each other in their efforts to get over the white supremacy. Black men encouraged their women to establish a wide range of local organizations and for Black women it was more important to support their men, who had no political and social power in white America, than to favor their own struggle against the sexual abuse. Therefore “anti-male sentiments of white women alienated African-American women from feminist movement. Their life experiences had shown them that they had more in common with men of their race group than with white women. They knew the sufferings and hardships men faced and they felt compassion for them. They have had the experience of struggling side by side with them for a better life. Throughout the United States history, Black women have shared equal responsibility in all struggles to resist racist oppression. There is a special tie binding together people who struggle collectively for liberation. Black women and men have been united by such ties. They have known the experience of political solidarity. It is the experience of shared resistance struggle that led Black women to reject the anti-male stance of some feminist activists. This does not mean that Black were not willing to acknowledge the reality of Black male sexism. It does mean that many of them did not believe they would combat sexism or woman-hating by attacking Black men. White women could not conceptualize the bonds that developed between women and men in liberation struggle because they did not have as many positive experiences working with men politically” (hooks 69).

On the other hand, there were a high number of African-American women who suffered from the Black men patriarchy. Though the “Black man moved toward the Black woman, clothing her raped and abused body with the mantle of respectable womanhood, giving protection and sometimes claiming ownership of her, many Black men agreed with white men that wives should submit themselves to their husbands in all things. As the dominant institution within the black community, the black church reinforced and supported the traditional patriarchal view on men claiming wardship over women” (Omolade 13).

Owing to all the differences between Black and white women during the development of the United States history, Black and white feminism must definitely differ though they

are both primarily concerned with women. Black feminism has been called womanism and it opposes all oppression based on race, sex, and class; womanists are women who are concerned with both Black men and women. The term itself was adapted from Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* who used the word to describe the experience of African-American women. She defines the word as follows:

**Womanist** 1. From *womanish*. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with other black folk expression: "You trying to be grown." Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: "Mama, why are we brown, pink, yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?" Ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented." Traditionally capable, as in: "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Reply: "it wouldn't be the first time."

3. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. *Loves* the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. *Loves* the folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.

4. Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender. (Walker xi-xii)

The following text tries to analyze the individuals who participate in the existence of the Bottom community and its development substantially. Some of them are aware of their rarity, some never recognize their otherness, but all of them represent the voices of individuals that make up the community. After these analyses, the work focuses on two of them – Shadrack and Sula – who achieved the most noticeable impact on their community life and thus, at least for a while, changed other people's social understanding.

### 3. ANALYSING INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS

#### 3. 1. Eva Peace

Eva Peace and her story are introduced by the description of the house which was built according to her ideas. In a figurative sense, this negligible fact slightly foreshadows Eva's character that is largely developed during the story. She represents a ruler who more or less rightfully checks other people's lives as well as she managed the building. Strong and strict, she is not one of the town people. Her strictness, and not only that, does not allow her to leave the rules and opinions that she understands to be essential, and eternal and that puts her on the edge, on the invisible border between accepted and unaccepted. She seems to live in the world of her inner rules and images of good and evil without exceptions for she is accepted by some and unaccepted by others.

Eva is a sovereign of the house who sits on the third floor in the wheelchair and directs the lives of her children, friends, and other people who constantly flow to and out of the house. She comes from Virginia and when she gets married to BoyBoy, they both move to Medallion because of BoyBoy's work. He builds a one-room cabin and they have three children – “Hannah, the eldest, and Eva, whom [Eva] named after herself but called Pearl, and a son Ralph, whom she called Plum” (Morrison 32). Eva and Boy Boy's marriage was not happy. “During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women. [...] He did whatever he could that he liked and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third” (Morrison 32). Then he leaves them. At the beginning some neighbors help her but she knows that it cannot last forever.

A month later she leaves her children at the neighbors and in a year and half “she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg” (Morrison 34). When she comes back, she picks up her children and starts to build a new house. When Plum is three, BoyBoy visits her once more and that is the last time she meets him. She stays in her house until 1937 when her granddaughter Sula returns back home and moves her to the institution. The story as such does not include Eva's death; in 1965 she still lives in the institution.

As already mentioned, Eva is a sovereign of the house, the real queen who directs other people's lives. It is visible for instance in her giving names to people around her. Giving

a name already marks the people and it can – as it usually does – characterize their future and fate. “Language is not a simple process of naming preexisting objects and states but a system through which we give meaning to the world (McLaughlin 86). In mythologies, God gives the right name to a privileged individual and as the nomenclator, has the power. Similarly, in biblical meaning, Eva might be compared to Eve, the first woman, who was named by Adam and who, in the figurative sense, follows the task of giving name” (Bergenholtz). The role of a reigning matriarch gives Eva Peace the power and independence and she, more or less, influences the members of her family or the people who stay in her house. Within the context of that, “Karen Stein says: ‘However, the labels hinder rather than promote the development of the people she names. The nicknames she gives to neighbors and to her own or adopted children become the ones they are known by. When she calls each of three very different adopted children Dewey, the similar names create an identical fate for all of them’” (Bergenholtz).

If a person interconnects his/her reigning and managing the material living with the power of giving name, he/she might easily slide into limited and one-sided manners. Impact of such actions surpasses the technical side of the process in a far-reaching way because it does not mean only a kind of material dependence on somebody having the power. It is followed by the mental possession whose effect is not tangible and immediate and as such hardly provable. As mentioned in the beginning, Eva Peace is a strict woman who obeys the rules of her own concept of good and evil but her position seems to be more complicated. She can be labeled neither as the good nor as the evil one. She does not play the role of an absolute ruler and in some situations she can be as fragile as anybody else. Yet, she moves on the edge and she often goes beyond the limits of her power. Though her behavior might be clearly explained and also explainable, she little accepts the diversity that spreads behind the territory of her rules. That is the most visible in her relationship to Plum and Sula. Eva does not understand the world of her son and granddaughter, and especially in a connection with Plum, she applies her own way of solution. The question of abusing the power arises together with the question of tolerance, which both form Eva’s character.

Eva’s relationship to Plum balances between the most sharpened feelings of love and its dark manifestations. When Plum is a baby, one day he stops having bowel movements and he suffers from a terrible pain. It happens shortly after BoyBoy leaves them and Eva

has nothing to help him properly. She has already tried all the available ways but finally she is forced to use their almost last bit of food to do it. At the night, while he cries bitterly, she turns Plum over her knee and inserts her fingers into his bottom. “Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. And now that it was over, Eva squatted there wondering why she had come all the way out there to free his stools, and what she was doing down on her haunches with her beloved baby boy warmed by her body in the almost total darkness, her shins and teeth freezing, her nostrils assailed. She shook her head as though to juggle her brains around, then said aloud, ‘Uh uh. Nooo,’” (Morrison 34).

Just before she squats down with Plum, she kicks over the slop jar with child’s urine, and there in the middle of freezing stench she reaches the point of herself. Plum, though too young to remember that, finds himself at the breakpoint of Eva’s life. It is after this event when she decides to leave her three children in order to save them all and she comes back with some money, but missing one leg. There is an empty space in the story which veils Eva’s next actions in secret. She would not be able to work because it was difficult to find the work that would not “keep her away from them from five thirty or earlier in the morning until dark”, and her “oldest child Hannah was five and too young to take care of” (Morrison 32-33) Pearl and Plum. Yet, she has to do something and therefore she leaves to arrange some food and regular money for her family.

She gives up her leg and her physical strength and beauty. The secret about what really happened to her is also intensified by the fact that “fewer than nine people in the town remembered when Eva had two legs” and “unless Eva herself introduced the subject, no one ever spoke of her disability” (Morrison 30). The background of her leg story is blurred and it is never explained properly even by Eva herself, which emphasizes her personal strength and strictness. The latter, first directed to Eva and her own actions, slowly spreads and starts to be pointed to other people too. For example, about men “Eva was equally prejudiced. She fused interminably with the brides of the newly wed couples for not getting their men’s supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc” (Morrison 42). Through the prism of her own actions she becomes an adamant judge who still remains a little strange but is respected by other people. On the other hand, that

development chains her in the invisible lack of self-actualization and causes her partial disability to understand people around her, to identify herself with their needs or feelings. Within the context of that, Eva represents an incredibly strong woman who does not hesitate to help other people but whose strictness does not allow her to go beyond herself. Her concept of good and evil is partly made of the general and long-lasting social scheme but simultaneously, under the light of her own actions.

There is also another story that seems to be important to Eva and that is the visit of BoyBoy. She becomes a different person after he visits her for the second and last time. It happens when Plum is three and she already waits for him because she heard about his return. He appears as “a picture of prosperity, with shiny orange shoes and a citified straw hat” (Morrison 35) and he comes with a woman waiting for him in front of the house. BoyBoy and Eva’s conversation is easy though, only a short time before his coming, Eva does not really know what to feel. She moves on the edge of love and hate, she is not sure if she should “cut his throat or beg him to make love to her” (Morrison 35). She loved him and he left her, which is something she cannot accept. In her world of good and evil he is the evil. At the end of his visit she already knows how to feel and what her feeling is about. She changes her love to him in a complete hate that fills her in the same way as the love did just a few years ago, and she does not hide any of these feelings. She hates him purely and deeply. She gives him all the time the same feeling and with the same intensity, it is only that her love takes a dress of hate. However, Eva changes when BoyBoy leaves her for the second time. She begins her retreat to her bedroom and then she refuses to put her feet on the stairs definitely. Since that time she goes down only three times: to put Plum on fire, to save Hannah from the fire and to leave the house on the stretcher.

Plum is Eva’s youngest son whom she loves deeply and “to whom she hoped to bequeath everything” (Morrison 45). In 1917 he goes to the war which he survives, but he does not go straight home when he returns to the United States. He stays in New York and other cities from where he sends the letters full of promises about his homecoming. Back in Medallion he appears after Christmas in 1920 and he “arrived with just the shadow of his old dip-down walk. His hair had been neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks. But he did have a black bag, a paper sack, and a sweet, sweet smile” (Morrison 45). He gets a room in Eva’s house and people around him

wait if there is something he wants to say. More precisely, Hannah watches and Eva waits. His habits are very similar to those of Tar Baby's who is a "beautiful, slight and quiet man, intent solely on drinking himself to death" (Morrison 39-40), but "there were no bottles, and Plum was sometimes cheerful and animated" (Morrison 45). Then he starts to steal things from them, leave the house for a few nights and lock himself in his room with the playing tape recorder. He gets thinner and it is Hannah who finds a "bent spoon black from steady cooking" (Morrison 45).

Plum is the reason why Eva steps out of her room. She goes to his room one night and she gathers sleeping Plum into her arms. Being thirsty, she chooses something that looks like a glass of strawberry crush. When she sips, she tastes blood-tainted water and throws it to the floor. Plum awakes and tells her to leave which she does, but only to come back. When she later enters the room, she pours the kerosene all over the Plum and lights a rolled piece of the newspaper. She throws it onto his bed and hobbles away, back to her room. She kills her son and however justifiable her action can be, there is a no less substantial question of the right to decide about someone else's life, in this case to a degree of killing. He is the same person whom she tried to save a long time before that at the dark freezing stench while he suffered from bowel obstruction and now she wants to save him again. Eva can see Plum crawling back in her womb, as she herself puts it, and therefore she decides to kill him. She has no more space in her womb, only in her heart, which, she thinks, is something that Plum refused. Later on, when she explains her action to Hannah, she says: "... a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (Morrison 72).

Eva cannot bear how her son continuously damages himself. Though she is not sure what exactly it is that takes Plum away from her, she can feel his crumpled soul. She assesses his immediate death as the last solution and that is the question of human power to terminate someone else's life that Eva exceeds. Giving the life does not obviously mean the right to take it away. Plum would probably die under the bad conditions but he might also get over his drug addiction, however unlikely that idea may appear. Eva cannot know if her action is right and the question whether she really has the right to decide

about other people's lives to that degree stays left without answer. To kill one's own progeny means to face one of the most sorrowful acts ever and Eva obviously feels how much great depth she has to touch. When she has finished her explanation to Hannah, she cannot see her clearly for the tears, saying: "But I held him close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy" (Morrison 72). That is the love of *Sula*. Not only its glittering form so often shown as the ultimate one, but the consistency of both, the most beautiful heights and the deepest darkness.

Another demonstration of Eva's incomprehension of the diversity of other people is her relationship to Sula. When Sula "was thirteen, everybody supposed her nature was coming down but it was hard to put up with her sulking and irritation" (Morrison 74). Eva's view on Sula definitely changes when Sula watches her mother's burning and does not help. Eva cannot understand and forgive Sula for her indifference and when Sula comes back home after ten years, Eva begins to lock herself in her bedroom. She is afraid of Sula and considers her cold-hearted and cruel. She obviously has the reason to fear Sula yet it is important to mention here her story with Plum again.

Eva kills Plum but denounces Sula who does not try to smother the flames on her mother's body. Sula witnesses the manifestation of the death and she simply comprehends the event according to her natural curiosity. She does not stare at her mother only; she can see the death in its pure process and she is fully aware of what she sees. Yet, though she does not kill her mother, she does not even do anything to help her. In contrast to that, Eva kills Plum because she understands her action as probably the best or the only possible way out of his existence. Nevertheless, there is no reason to measure a degree of guilt in those two particular actions. The point of Eva and Sula's mutual distrust is the way they behave to each other and they understand their actions. Eva condemns Sula, which might be justifiable; on the other hand, hardly any action can be judged only from one point of view. Eva has a full right to think anything about Sula. However, another question is the objectivity in judging one's own actions in comparison to the actions of other people. Simply said, and without any defense of Sula, she gets tightly determined in Eva's own world of good and evil, from where there is only little chance to escape and get a different label. Eva refuses Sula's indifference and Sula, on the other hand, considers Eva cruel because of her burning Plum. That is the conflict in their relationship, where neither purely good nor bad one exists, but especially



within the context of Eva and her point of view, it is her own unofficial position of the sovereign, which prevails. However, she goes to leave her kingdom on the stretchers soon.

Eva's, more or less quietly, self-declared position of the sovereign might be also seen in another event which is the death of her daughter Hannah. Hannah puts herself on fire accidentally and just when Eva sees that, she jumps out of the window to save her. She almost dies, still crawling to her daughter but she has no chance to fight her physical disability. Somebody calls an ambulance that takes them both, the badly burnt Hannah and bleeding Eva, to the hospital, but only the latter comes there alive. Hannah, as Toni Morrison writes, "died on the way to the hospital. Or so they said" (Morrison 77).

Though there is no other hint of killing Hannah, it may be taken into consideration that Eva kills her in the ambulance. She kills Plum to save him from not being a man and she may also kill Hannah to save her from not being a woman, from ugliness and an absolute physical damage. She cannot protect her from death, so she protects her from the life. Eva suspects how unbearable it would be to live in the body which once used to be beautiful and which would probably awaken only two feelings – absolute disgust and deep pity. Thus, Eva declares herself a creator who terminates Hannah's future life full of sorrow and pain.

Yet, there are big differences between Plum's and Hannah's deaths and their suffering. Hannah would stay, with her bubbling and blistering body, destroyed for the rest of her life, unlike Plum, who might be either saved or lost. Hannah's damage takes place first on the surface and then inside, while Plum's one hides mainly inside and then spreads up slowly. Eva may appear as the creator, whose right to name people equals her competence to finish her children's lives, which may all simply spring from her unlimited but respected position of a sovereign of the house and the head of the family. Yet, it represents only one side of Eva's contradictory personality. However insensitive or vicious she might be considered, Eva still remains the one who gave up her leg to let her children survive.

As already mentioned, Eva also shows her power in naming people. Not taking into account her children, Eva unwittingly applies her might in the relationship to Deweys. She is an open-hearted woman who does not hesitate to look after the people, so among

the tenants in her big house are the children Eva takes in. “When her granddaughter Sula was eleven, Eva had three such children. They came with woolen caps and names given to them by their mothers, or grandmothers, or somebody’s best friend. Eva snatched the caps off their heads and ignored their names” (Morrison 37). She calls all three boys Dewey though each Dewey significantly differs from the other two. They slowly became a trinity – “inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves. [...] They spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy. Stouthearted, surly, and wholly unpredictable, the deweys remained a mystery not only during all of their lives in Medallion but after as well” (Morrison 39). Eva calls them and treats them all the same but her treatment may be also determined as insensitive. She “follows the folk wisdom which urges a mother to treat all her children the same. Consequently, the deweys are bludgeoned into insipid sameness by folk love and indifference” (Bergenholtz). Goodness melts here into the power that might be more or less realized, but what may seem to be equality first, finally appears to be a disdain.

All in all, Eva as such is a beautiful woman who does not lose her grace, in spite of having only one leg. “Old as she was, and with one leg, Eva had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter. The men wanted to see her lovely calf, that neat shoe, and the focusing that sometimes swept down out of the distance in her eyes. They wanted to see a joy in her face as they settled down to play checkers, knowing that even when she beat them, as she almost always did, somehow, in her presence, it was they who had won something. They would read the newspapers aloud to her and make observations on its content, and Eva would listen feeling no obligation to agree and, in fact, would take them to task about their interpretation of events. But she argued with them with such an absence of bile, such a concentration of manlove, that they felt their convictions solidified by her disagreement” (Morrison 41-42).

Eva represents an incredibly strong personality who unconditionally follows what she considers right. She gives up her leg in order to protect her children and family; she looks after the children who just aimlessly roamed around her house; she is independent and fair-minded. On the other hand, as it was touched above, she seems to abuse her position slightly. Her actions toward Plum, Sula and the Deweys put a question mark over the adequacy and limits within the context of the right to determine other people’s lives. Eva

seems to overstep her position of the sovereign of the house, but not because some of her actions may be easily condemned or considered murders. She goes beyond her rights because she looks at the people around from no other point of view but her own. Eva creates her world of good and evil which is obviously based on her own life experience and character, and until she finds herself in confrontation with other people, there is nothing wrong with that at all. Despite the fact that her own limits can prevent her from changing anything in her developed world, her actions move her on the edge of her inner self. She remains both sensitive and strong and as the last member of the Peace family, put into the institution, she has enough time to muse on a number of things.

Eva, with her actions, can be determined neither good nor bad. “Toni Morrison says: I was interested ... in doing a very old, worn-out idea, which was to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms. I started out by thinking that one can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good – you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to’ (Intimate 215-216). In this area, Eva, the matriarch of the Peace family and a symbol of black folk wisdom, represents a number of interpretative problems” (Bergenholtz).

### **3. 2. Hannah Peace**

Hannah Peace is Eva’s oldest child, in the story captured in about her thirties, a beautiful woman with a smooth skin and long neck. “Hannah married a laughing man named Rekus who died when their daughter Sula was about three years old, at which time Hannah moved back into her mother’s big house prepared to take care of it and her mother forever” (Morrison 41). She lives in the house and though she has no need to get married again, she loves all men. Hannah represents a physical beauty, a gesture of love that demands nothing and as such gets almost everything.

After Rekus’s death, Hannah refuses to live without the attentions of a man and she has “a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors” (Morrison 42). She loves men and she takes them in the cellar or in the pantry because there are no places in the crowded house for private and spontaneous lovemaking. Only rarely she sleeps with them in the parlor or in her bedroom. She does not do it because she shares the bedroom with her daughter and because of her lovers’ tendency to fall

asleep afterwards. Yet, there is also another reason to avoid that: “Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment” (Morrison 43-44).

It seems to be her love to Rekus that covers all the aspects of love. After his death all of them, except for the physical one, seem to stay bonded with him. Nevertheless, Hannah is neither cold nor calculating. She does not demand any kind of commitment and stays herself. She is respected by men; her flirting is sweet, low and guileless. “Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was – he didn’t need fixing – and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was” (Morrison 43). Hannah loves sex and “without ever a pat of the hair, a rush to change clothes or a quick application of paint, with no gesture whatsoever, she ripples with it” (Morrison 42). Though her lovemaking might be judged as morally problematic and reckless, she does not lose anything of her grace. “What she wanted, after Rekus died, and what she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching every day” (Morrison 44).

One day Hannah’s daughter Sula overhears Hannah talking to her friends. All three women speak about the problems of child rearing and one of the women doubts about her feelings to her grown daughter when Hannah says: “Sure you do. You love her like I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (Morrison 57). Hannah loves Sula because she is her daughter, the child who comes from her; on the other hand, it looks like she has no other interest in her. In a few short sentences Hannah expresses her ambivalent attitude to Sula that represents a split of her inner feelings. She moves on the edge between what is in public considered right and what she really and privately feels. For Eva and other women from the town, “mothering, care-taking and running household are non-negotiable women’s work” (Galehouse). Hannah accepts all that but going further to herself, she reveals her real feelings. Though she would do anything for Sula, she is aware of the difference between loving and liking her. She loves her deeply and truly while she doubts what her feelings are about. That is what makes the people human beings – the thoughtful departure from the given certainties to the existing realities and seeking the balance between them.

Hannah acts as a mother to Sula and also as a daughter to Eva. She lives in her mother's house and looks after her, while she brings up her daughter. One day she comes to Eva with a question if she ever loved Plum and her, but she does not seem to be satisfied with Eva's answer: "You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't" (Morrison 68). In Eva's losing leg Hannah can see what she considers love to own children but her question adverts to what she considers liking them. Nevertheless, Eva does not distinguish particular forms of love to her children in comparison to Hannah who doubts about them.

According to Hannah's reaction and her own feelings toward Sula, a different answer would probably satisfy her more. It would assure her of other women and mothers, who might feel the same, and they do, but Eva's answer shows that she herself does not suppose any division of the given and the existing in this way. Thus, Hannah appears to be further than Eva because of her ability to rise above her own world of good and evil that she, certainly, has too. Hannah's questioning is what enriches and deepens her personality and makes her beauty complete.

Hannah dies when she is thirty-three. She prepares mason jars for canning and while lighting the yard fire she goes up in flames. Hannah was burning and looked as though she was dancing with the flames that licked her body. "Mr. and Mrs. Suggs, who set up their canning apparatus in their front yard, saw her running, dancing toward them. They whispered, 'Jesus, Jesus,' and together hoisted up their tub of water in which tight red tomatoes floated and threw it on the smoke-and-flame-bound woman. The water did put out the flames, but it also made steam, which seared to sealing all that was left of the beautiful Hannah Peace. She lay there on the wooden sidewalk planks, twitching lightly among the smashed tomatoes, her face a mask of agony so intense that for years the people who gathered around would shake their heads at the recollection of it" (Morrison 76).

At that time Hannah stays alive and those who stare at the catastrophe call the ambulance and begin seeking for Eva. "They found her on her stomach by the forsythia bushes calling Hannah's name and dragging her body through the sweet peas and clover that grew under the forsythia by the side of the house" (Morrison 77). Eva, who tries to save

her daughter from the fire, jumps out of the window but she finds herself too far from dancing Hannah. When the ambulance comes, mother and daughter are “placed on stretchers and carried to it. Eva was wide awake. The blood from her face cuts filled her eyes so she could not see, could only smell the familiar odor of cooked flesh” (Morrison 77). Hannah dies on the way to the hospital, or so it is said; what happens in the ambulance stays hidden and nowhere literally uttered. As analyzed in the previous part, Hannah probably dies in her mother’s hands, which might also represent Eva’s real answer to her previous question of love to her children. If she did not love Hannah, she would never kill her and she would let her suffer for the rest of her life.

Hannah Peace represents one of the most crucial characters in the town. Together with Eva and Sula they all differ from the rest of the people in the town. These three women of three generations that live together in one house complete each other exactly as much as they differ from each other. Hannah is a bridge and what begins at Eva, continues at her and culminates at Sula. Hannah, similarly to Eva, is strong and independent though it does not have to be recognized immediately. Despite the number of her lovers, she keeps and protects her privacy closely; she explores her feelings, balances them and asks questions. Her beauty means the connection of physical and mental layers that perfectly correspond in her. Hannah is the picture of imperfect perfection that remains generous but unsettling, resented but not detested.

### **3. 3. Sula Peace**

Sula Peace represents arguably one of the most complicated characters in Morrison’s fiction. It is not easy to understand her controversial actions or to identify with her personality unconditionally; it is also impossible to give her personality any concrete and tangible form. Sula seems to follow the way set by Eva and continued by Hannah, although none of them recognizes that fully. They are all outstanding women who differ from their community and other people in the town and in Sula’s character that exceptionality seems to culminate. She is beautiful, strong and independent; she is strange, curious and unrestrained.

Sula is Rekus and Hannah’s daughter who was born in 1910. Her father dies when she is three, which is the reason of Hannah’s and her return to Eva’s house. Sula grows up in

Medallion where she meets Nel, her best friend. When she is seventeen, she leaves the town and comes back after ten years. After that she sends the old Eva to the institution and stays in the house alone until her death that comes in a few years. To analyze Sula means to take into consideration her best friend Nel who is crucial for her. They represent an indivisible unity, which they both know, no matter that each of them come to it at different time.

Sula grows up in a completely different atmosphere from Nel. She lives in a big house with her idiosyncratic grandmother Eva and beautiful mother Hannah, together with three informally adopted boys, an alcoholic Tar Baby and a steady stream of boarders. In the house there is almost no effort to form anyone's character in order to fit the general concept of life, and Sula's background is made of unusual women. Moreover, she is led by her emotions and natural need to scrutinize the life as much as she can. Later, she refuses to submit herself to the community, which causes her final rejection by the people around her.

Sula, as a child, "was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birth mark 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" (Morrison 52-53).

One of the most important events of Sula's life is the accident in which the boy Little Chicken dies. Sula and Nel go to the river where they meet him and they play together. While swinging him around, Sula accidentally throws him into the river. "The water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Little Chicken sank. The pressure of his hard and tight fingers was still in Sula's palms as she stood looking at the closed place in the water. They expected him to come back up, laughing. Both girls stared at the water" (Morrison 61). When Little Chicken disappears in the water, Nel catches sight of a figure on the opposite shore. They think it is Shadrack and Sula suddenly decides to run to his house. "Her running was swift and determined, but when she was close to the three little steps that led to his porch, fear crawled into her stomach and only the something

newly missing back there in the river made it possible for her to walk up the three steps and knock at the door” (Morrison 61). There is nobody inside and Sula looks around when she notices Shadrack. They stare at each other and no one says anything until Sula leaves and turns her head to him once more. There is a question in her eyes and he seems to answer that. He says: “Always” (Morrison 62).

All those aspects of the Little Chicken death exercise considerable influence on Sula. She regrets the accident deeply and at the funeral cries bitterly. “Soundlessly and with no heaving and gasping for breath, she let the tears roll into her mouth and slide down her chin to dot the front of her dress” (Morrison 65). Since that also Sula’s relationship to Shadrack changes and until her death she stays fearful of and curious about him because he represents her constant and endless remorse of the action she regrets so much. Finally, and though the core of their bond is based on mutual misunderstanding, they become more bonded with each other than she would ever admit.

Another important event of Sula’s life is hearing her mother talking about not liking her. That incident precedes the accident with Little Chicken that happens on the same day. Sula is twelve at that time and both these events influence her largely. Hannah’s point of view, analyzed in the previous part, certainly differs from Sula’s point of view. Being a child, she cannot understand the doubts her mother has because she does not divide love yet. For her it is something inseparable and there are only two possibilities – to love or not to. Though she is too young to comprehend Hannah’s words, they form and teach her that there is no one else to rely on. She feels rejected by her mother, which, on the other hand, makes her stronger. The only person she trusts is Nel, while her relationship to Hannah gradually changes.

Within the context of Hannah’s words, it may be in a way clearer why Sula does not do anything to help her mother when she is on fire, but it would be misleading to understand her action as a kind of revenge. That event simply shows Sula’s character more than anything else. She stares at her mother in flames because her natural curiosity does not allow her to intervene. She is curious about everything, without regard to what it is connected to – love, sex, death, or anything else. Her interest in the world around is endless, which may cause her often going beyond the limits.



That Sula's passive reaction results in alienation with Eva. "When Eva, who was never one to hide the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she'd seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested" (Morrison 78). Nevertheless, Eva is right. Sula, who is thirteen at that time, has already grown up significantly and her life experience begins to strengthen her natural interest. Yet that appears free of both calculation and cruel purpose. "I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing" (Morrison 147).

The two incidents mentioned above figure prominently in Sula's development. The conversation in which she overhears her mother and her participation in the drowning of Little Chicken represent pillars of Sula's life. Morrison sums up the overall effect of these incidents in one passage: "... she [Sula] lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, hers was an experimental life – ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. The first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow.... She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself – be consistent with herself" (Morrison 118-119).

Sula leaves her hometown shortly after Nel's wedding for ten years, during which she travels across the country and attends college. When she comes back to Medallion, she astonishes everybody. "She was dressed in a manner that was as close to a movie star as anyone would ever see. A black crepe dress splashed with pink and yellow zinnias, foptails, a black felt hat with the veil of net lowered over one eye. In her right hand was a black purse with a beaded clasp and in her left a red leather traveling case so small, so charming – no one had seen anything like it ever before, including the mayor's wife and the music teacher, both of whom had been to Rome" (Morrison 90). As a Morrison

scholar Maggie Galehouse puts it, “[w]hen she returns, she refuses to maintain the house in the manner of her mother and grandmother before her. As the second thing, her sexual exploits do not (nor does she intend them to) lead her to a state of monogamy, shared domesticity, or even steady companionship; with one memorable exception, Sula’s interactions with men are consciously finite” (Galehouse). Her position in the town becomes complicated. Sula is different; she disturbs the fixed conventions and seems to be the lightning rod for all possible troubles. Finally, her only friend Nel condemns her and she stays alone but not unhappy.

Nel welcomes Sula open-heartedly and warmly but everything changes when she later finds her husband Jude with Sula in their bedroom. “They had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips [...] on all fours [...] like dogs. Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other, just their lips” (Morrison 105). Though Sula’s sleeping with Jude is not personal and it is merely yet another of her experiences, she loses her friend entirely. Since that there is nobody who she can rely on and when, later, she stays abandoned by Ajax, her loneliness becomes complete. However, Sula does not feel desperate. When she gets sick, she simply places herself in Eva’s bedroom and bed, where she is about to die. Though being poor and ill, she is patiently waiting for death with her mind bent on going through the very last experience without hatred and in the same way she has experienced her life.

Yet, independent Sula also “seeks the boundaries, looks for the limits and limitations”. Her desire for them is best illustrated in her love for Ajax because only Ajax, a man as strong and free as herself, changes her. ‘With Ajax, Sula feels the desire of possession and of attempting to know a person other than herself. Ajax, however, desires Sula that is separate, complete in her solitude. He, like Sula, is a true individual and he leaves her when she wants to limit him by making him hers alone. When she says ‘Lean on me’ (Morrison 133), Sula is asking Ajax to give up his freedom – to become bound to her, and to bind herself to him and to the community. Ajax rejects this relationship for the radical freedom that he has learned from his mother, another outsider: ‘He dragged [Sula] under him and made love to her with the steadiness and the intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton’” (Morrison 134) (Jones).

Sula stays alone and suffers from the loss she experiences. On the other hand, being aware of her natural curiosity, she considers Ajax's leave a kind of happy end: "It's just as well he left. Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity. They would have believed that I wanted to hurt him..." (Morrison 136-137). Sula, as mentioned above, is free of ambitions and the urge for possessing things, and Ajax is the man with whom she falls in love fully. Finally, it is the love that uncovers, or perhaps triggers, her need to possess and in this way she begins to resemble the town women. Yet, she does not change, really. Her inquisitive interest in everything (with a few exceptions), leads her to strange situations and painful discoveries but, first and foremost, it leads her to herself and as such she stays the same.

Sula, as said above, is a beautiful woman who in her near thirties does not look her age. "She was near thirty and, unlike them [the other people from the town], had lost no teeth, suffered no bruises, developed no ring of fat at the waist or pocket at the back of her neck" (Morrison 115). The only thing that might disturb her perfectness is her birthmark which, on the other hand, emphasizes her beauty. As Sula grows, the birthmark on her eye changes, and the older she becomes, the bigger does the mark grow. It is described as a stemmed rose but it is also interpreted as a "copperhead, a tadpole, a scary black thing, and as the ashes of Sula's mother, whom Sula watches burn to death in the back yard. This physical inscription identifies Sula as touched by something out-of-the-ordinary, perhaps menacing, perhaps powerful. A natural, biological stamp, the mark appears over her eye, signifying a break in the sequence of her face, which alters the nature of her eye/I. It distinguishes beyond gender and beyond a simple cultural inscription. Unlike clothing, tattooing, or other, more contrived means of self-presentation, Sula's permanent, 'natural' adornment comes unencumbered by invention or economic signification. It exoticizes her, setting her apart from the rest of the community" (Galehouse).

Sula's birthmark has biblical resonance. Carolyn Jones argues that "the birthmark functions like the mark of Cain, publicly setting Sula apart from the community's action and ideals. Jones cites the Genesis Rabbah, which says that God 'beat Cain's face with hail, which blackened like coal, and thus he remained with a black face' (626). Certainly, what Sula shares with Cain is social isolation, ostracism, and a profound absence of guilt,

for example in her interaction with Nel, Jude and other people from the town” (Galehouse). All those associations deepen Sula’s uniqueness and unusualness, which is further strengthened by her strong and unyielding individuality. Her beauty, together with her birthmark and character, complicate her position in the town and her whole life. She becomes stigmatized but does not really want to change anything about that, being aware of the importance of her own point of view.

Sula dies at the age of thirty, alone in her grandmother’s house and room. She is lying in the bed, suffering from the terrible pain that has taken hold, and she is dreaming. Her thoughts and memories mingle with the visions and images that help her forget the pain. In this way she concludes her life with its particular events and thinks about herself which may resemble both a kind of epilog and apology: “That’s the same sun I looked at when I was twelve, the same pear trees. If I live a hundred years my urine will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same. My hair will grow from the same holes. I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything” (Morrison 147).

The Bottom and her grandmother’s house mean the end for Sula; they represent the closure of the circle of her experience. by Abandoned Ajax, Sula thinks: “There aren’t any more new songs and I have sung all the ones there are” (Morrison 137). “All that is left for her to experience is death. Dying, she faces a sealed window – the window from which her grandmother threw herself while trying to save Hannah. The boarded window soothes Sula with its sturdy termination and unassailable finality. The closed room represents the end of the tyranny of the eye/I, the closing off of Sula’s single perspective” (Jones).

She dies as she has lived, curious about everything and interested in the unique experience of the moment, which affirms her own mode of being in the world. Her death is neither desperate nor fearful because it is her endless desire that allows her to lived life to the brim until the very end. “In this state of weary anticipation, she noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. A crease of fear touched her breast, for any second there was sure to be a violent explosion in her brain, a gasping for breath. Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling” (Morrison 149).

### 3. 4. Nel Wright

Nel Wright is Sula's best friend who is at the same age as Sula but who comes from a completely different family and who was also brought up differently. Nel does not seem to represent as complicated character as Sula and for readers it is easier to identify with her. Yet, Nel would be only a half person without Sula and otherwise. That proves not only their mutual unity, but also the complicatedness of Nel's personality, however untrue the latter might first appear. Nel does not disturb traditional images of a woman and plays her expected role in the society perfectly; on the other hand, she is able to exceed her limits and free herself, though she needs longer time to do it.

Nel's mother Helene was born to a Creole whore but she grew up with her grandmother who "took her away from the soft lights and flowered carpets of the Sundown House and raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary, counseling her to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood" (Morrison 17). When Helene gets married, she moves to Medallion where she lives a fairly decent life, in line with her ideas. She manages her daughter's and husband's lives with no regard to their needs or feelings, simply because she does not suppose other people may feel or do something differently. "Under Helene's hand the girl [Nel] became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasm that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison 18).

Helene is satisfied with her life; she loves her perfectly tidy house and enjoys manipulating her daughter and husband. Under her control, Nel becomes featureless and almost uninteresting. On the other hand, Helene is the reason why Nel, for the first time, realizes herself separated from her mother. It is a trip to Nel's great-grandmother which makes her think of herself as of a separate unit. When she comes back, she already knows: "She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her. 'I'm me,' she whispered. 'Me.' Nel didn't know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant. 'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me'" (Morrison 28). Yet, that changes as soon as she meets Sula, with whom, as said above, they complete each other absolutely.

Nel represents the character strongly influenced by her mother that finally makes her development more complicated and her way to herself more difficult. The accident of Little Chicken, who drowned in the river, has the same impact on her as on Sula but she does not know that. Almost whole her life she believes that she has nothing to do with that. For her it is an accident in which the main guilt – if there is any – Sula bears. “Nel and Sula did not touch hands or look at each other during the funeral. There was a space, a separateness, between them. Nel’s legs had turned to granite and she expected the sheriff or Reverend Deal’s pointing finger at any moment. Although she knew she had ‘done nothing,’ she felt convicted and hanged right there in the pew – two rows down from her parents in the children’s section” (Morrison 64-65).

That separateness opens the space between Sula and Nel, which later becomes a larger alienation and which lasts until Nel is fifty-five and visits old Eva in the institution. First, Eva does not distinguish Nel from Sula and second, she accuses Nel of watching the drowning. That is the moment when Nel comes to herself and fully realizes that all the time she has been lying to herself, having tried to persuade herself about her own innocence: “What did 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” (Morrison 170).

That is Nel’s process of development which takes long time to open entirely, but which also heads toward the absoluteness. Nel, finally being able to throw away the mask of wrong self-actualization, comes to her true self and becomes complete and beautiful. At the same time she loses the bonds made by her mother and these, however deeply rooted and sustained, suddenly disappear. That is what changes her fully and gives her featureless character a distinctive form.

All in all, it is a friendship with Sula makes Nel’s character complete. Her mother’s effort to rub down all her distinctive features is disturbed by Sula’s presence that represents an element of wildness. Yet, it all seems to disappear with Sula’s leave shortly after Nel’s wedding ceremony. Nel gets married to handsome Jude who enjoys the idea of being a husband. In contrast, Nel appears to be “receptive but hardly anxious for his proposal” (Morrison 82). Settling down and getting married, she becomes exactly what her mother

Helene wanted her to be, but it is not only the marriage itself that is a cause of this Nel's process of development.

Not only does Sula, her essential constituent, leave her, but also her relationship to Jude loses its appeal to her. He wants to be a husband, no matter to whom really, because for him marriage is a kind of personal necessity. He definitely likes Nel but it seems to be difficult to call his feelings love. They have two children and they live a rather happy married life for more than ten years. After the affair with Sula Jude leaves Nel and their children in Medallion and goes away for good. For Nel, Jude is almost everything. She is aware of the boredom that has settled down around their love but having no one else, she loves him, or she thinks so. When she finds him naked with Sula, she feels lost and desperate as well as confused and wronged, because, on the contrary to Sula, for Nel making love to Jude is more than an experience.

Nel goes through a difficult personal development during her whole life, in which she seems to be stuck between what has been demanded from her and what she really wants. Her mother's influence together with her nonaggressive character makes Nel's development slower and more complicated; her deepest nature stays hidden until the very end of the story. After finding Jude and Sula in her bedroom Nel becomes embittered and lonely: "Think. But who could think in that bed where *they* had been and where they *also* had been and where only she was now?" (Morrison 106-107). Her loneliness changes into a ball that weighs heavily on her soul and shoulders. It takes a form of a materialized evil and unspoken grievance that suddenly rises up and appears unexpectedly. "She could not see it, but she knew exactly what it looked like. A gray ball hovering just there. [...] Quiet, gray, dirty. A ball of muddy strings, but without weight, fluffy but terrible in its malevolence...the gray ball, the little ball of fur and string and hair always floating in the light near her but which she did not see because she never looked" (Morrison 108-109).

"It is Nel who survives in *Sula*, living long after her husband and children have departed, long after Sula's death. She is the character left to finish the business of the story, clean up the narrative strands, have the epiphany at the end of the novel, and be for the readers that character who approaches movement, change, and transcendence" (Galehouse). Being finally able to look at the ball directly, Nel, on her way from the cemetery, breaks the shell of the deep-rooted harm and comes to herself. Though she needs longer time,

she is able to touch the most hidden and deepest essence of her self and burst into tears when she realizes that it has not been, as she thought, Jude but Sula whom she has missed all that time. Her cry is long and loud and while she floats in the never-ending stream of sorrow, the gray ball of muddy strings disappears.

### **3. 5. Shadrack**

Shadrack is a character that is, together with Sula, introduced at the very beginning of the novel. He is a World War I veteran who suffers from the war experience which evolves out his war and post-war trauma. Though he in a way participates in the town life, he stays out of that. Behind the transparent but firm wall separating him from other people, he fights the fears that constantly spring to the surface. He dreams his fish dream in the shack near the river and muses on the subject of death.

Shadrack is less than twenty and not really worried when he goes to the war but what he is going to experience really changes his life. In a while he finds himself in a mess that soaks into each pore of his skin and he is afraid: “A young man of hardly twenty, his head full of nothing and his mouth recalling the taste of lipstick, Shadrack had found himself in December, 1917, running with his comrades across a field in France. [...] Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with the energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back” (Morrison 8).

The soldier resembles a paper doll losing its head, which represents a picture of human helplessness and that is the way Shadrack sees himself. He changes from the light-hearted young man into an embodied hesitance. Nevertheless, even later, he does not give up the possibility to handle his fears, which culminates in the National Suicide Day he has instituted.

After the war, “Shadrack must battle with his phenomenal body, with the unpredictability of his hands: ‘With extreme care he lifted one arm and was relieved to find his hand attached to his wrist. He tried the other and found it also. Slowly he directed one hand



toward the cup and, just as he was about to spread his fingers, they began to grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack's beanstalk all over the tray and the bed' (Morrison 9). Relieved when he is straitjacketed and his hands are confined, Shadrack then becomes anxious about his other body parts: 'If his hands behaved as they had done, what might he expect from his face?' (Morrison 10) But when he sees himself reflected in toilet water, it is precisely his face that assures him of his reality: '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.' (Morrison 13) His black face provides him with immediate comfort, calming his terrible fingers" (Ryan).

National Suicide Day takes place on the third day of the New Year and it slowly integrates itself into the town life. Maggie Galehouse in her work says: "Shadrack need National Suicide Day to help him order existence. Certainly, his name reinforces the displacement – the near obliteration – of his self. In the Book of Daniel, Shadrach is one of three Jews sent to the fiery furnace by King Ned-u-chad-nez'ar for failing to serve the king's gods or the golden image that the king has raised. Yet Shadrach and the other two men are saved by their faith in God, emerging from the furnace unharmed. The king recognizes the power of their faith, decreeing that 'there is no other God that can deliver after this sort' (Daniel 3.29). Like his biblical namesake, then, Shadrack doggedly defends and enforces the parameters of his own reality" (Galehouse).

Shadrack establishes the Suicide Day for his need to handle his fear which at times morphs into hallucinations. Being aware of death and realizing its existence permanently, he makes a deal with Death. In Shadrack's own world, they signed an agreement. "It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and rest of the year would be safe and free" (Morrison 14).

Shadrack lives in his shack near the river in a perfect tidiness. Though he keeps away from the people around, he still remembers his only visitor Sula and likes these memories a great deal. He avoids people in order to keep distance from them, yet he desires not to

be alone. He is neither embittered nor bad, and for years he, by his eyes, strokes the belt left there by Sula. She is the one with whom Shadrack is prepared to share his world: “It was pleasant living with that sign of a visitor, his only one. And after a while he was able to connect the belt with the face, the tadpole-over-the-eye-face that he sometimes saw up in the Bottom. His visitor, his company, his guest, his social life, his woman, his daughter, his friend – they all hung there on a nail near his bed” (Morrison 157).

Shadrack seems to be watching his own story on the river surface and through the emptied bottles. He devotes his time to his river dream of death; nevertheless, he changes. “Yet the drunk times were becoming deeper but more seldom. It was as though he no longer needed to drink to forget whatever it was he could not remember. Now he could not remember that he had ever forgotten anything. Perhaps that was why for the first time after that cold day in France he was beginning to miss the presence of other people. [...] The messier his house got, the lonelier he felt and it was harder and harder to conjure up sergeants and orderliness, and invading armies. [...] More frequently now he looked at and fondled the one piece of evidence that he once had a visitor in his house: a child’s purple-and-white belt” (Morrison 155-156). Finally, Shadrack seems to overcome his fears and hallucinations. Slowly resigning his contract with the Death, he loses the voices from his head, and his former fears change into sadness. Shadrack feels simultaneously deprived of his fear as well as of the people. Yet, he does not miss people as such. He misses Sula, his picture of closeness.

Shadrack is a strongly sensitive person whose previous relationship to the world around changes into the distance and reserve. He loses his light-heartedness and appears in the middle of the strange world that he finds kept in hands of the unpredictable and sudden Death. Though he institutes the National Suicide Day to give the Death a space to take anything, he slowly starts to resign it and finally, he gives that up altogether. It is Sula’s dead body which changes his attitude to death and he renounces his previous contract with it. He stays alone, sitting on the shore and watching the river where no more fish appear, and he can feel no merest need to renew the agreement.

## 4. PARTICULAR INDIVIDUALS VS. BOTTOM COMMUNITY

### 4. 1. The Peace women

The Peace women represent a family of outstanding women who differ from the rest of the Bottom people. As it follows from the previous parts of the thesis, they all represent strong individualities whose mutual relationships can be called neither harmony nor simplicity. On the other hand, to speak about them means to speak about love in its purest form. Their characters, which resemble each other as much as they differ from each other, do not help them live problem-free lives but it does not deprive them of anything either.

As said, their coexistence is not easy. They love (or like) each other as well as they do not, which, as such, does not mean anything special. Similar entanglement of love characterizes complications of feelings and uneasiness of relationships that constantly appear among all people, but what makes the Peace women different is their ability to describe the things and give them some concrete names. In this way, they may appear rough but that is what simultaneously makes them vulnerable – they do not subordinate their nature to what they should feel or how they should behave but at the same time, thanks to their asking for explanation, they are about to touch the deepest recesses of their souls.

“Those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women liked maleness, for its own sake” (Morrison 41). This description mainly of Hannah and Eva includes Sula, too. She inherited the manlove from Eva and Hannah and she also, like her mother, likes touching somebody and getting touched. The manlove is one of the things that connect the Peace women entirely. Awareness of being a woman gives them beauty and grace that seems to be typical for them. They are confident, strong and independent; they love men but also themselves. Though they appear to have no need to fulfill social patterns of male and female relationships, they have no need to harm anyone either. Their behavior to men is free of ambitions and grudge, similarly as their behavior to their lovers’ wives. None of the Peace women mean anything by sleeping with their friends’ husbands. Their attitude

to manlove is timeless, but simultaneously hardly acceptable by other people. In this way, the Peace women pass the time they live in and they also do it far to the future. Their lack of need to possess anybody makes them attractive but unacceptable at the same time.

According to the outlined concept of the society and its particular individuals, the Peace women represent those whose contributions seem to be rather active. Eva, as the head of her family, would probably say that her behavior and character only reflected the outside impulses which she was somehow forced to follow. Yet, if there was no inner strength in her, she would be never able to become as independent and strong as she was. Within the context of men, her behavior to them means openness free of hate and Eva seems to be (in this way) respected by both town men and women. On the other hand, the question is (however foolish it may first sound) whether she would be still respected, if she slept with the men instead of talking, reading and playing checkers with them. At least, she would become the theme of town gossip and her situation would resemble Hannah's one. Similarly, her position would also change, if the people knew she had killed Plum.

However, and among all, Eva's active contribution points to the system established and sustained by white Americans. Left by BoyBoy and unable to look after their children by herself but considering them to be the most precious and important item in her life, she decided to give up her leg. She forces the state system to remunerate her for her lost leg because in her position, her plea would otherwise hardly be acknowledged, she would soon become invisible. Her situation is uninteresting for ruling white Americans, and African-Americans help only if they can. And because at that time they were constantly disadvantaged by the white supremacy in almost all aspects of their lives, their help was not limited only by the low wages and hard jobs but also by other everyday demonstrations of segregation and racial discrimination legalized by Jim Crow laws. That lasted "nearly a century, from the 1896 'separate but equal' decision of Plessy vs. Ferguson until the 1954 decision in Brown vs. The Board of Education, which overturned the 1896 doctrine" (Omolade 34-35).

That would be the reason of Eva's potential invisibility. An African-American single mother was by the white American law considered nothing more than a typical phenomenon of the Black community and as such she was not eligible for any considerable help. "To most Black and white politicians and social scientists, African-

American families have been by definition pathological – ‘broken,’ ‘illegitimate,’ ‘incubators of the Black underclass’ that perpetuate poverty, teenage pregnancy, crime, and welfare dependence. Historically, problems in the white family have been attributed to individual failure while problems in the Black family are seen as evidence of collective Black pathology” (Omolade 68).

### **A hated outsider as a solidifier of the community**

Within the context of Hannah, her position differs from the current one of Eva though she would probably also insist on following the outside impulses. Nevertheless, Hannah appears on the edge, being respected by the men she sleeps with, not by their wives. She is neither bad nor calculative and she does not want to possess anybody. In this way she contradicts the general understanding of being with one man that somehow automatically includes complete possession and thus, she unsettles the town women. For the men she is beautiful, different and exciting; to the women she represents a kind of danger, but the one which simultaneously flatters them. The town women need to delimit against her and resist her presence because they know that she is their men’s potential lover, and a lover the men actually respect. Unsettling the women, she gives them a perfect opportunity to realize how much they love their men; she provides them a realization of their love because she simply demonstrates how desirable their men are.

Hannah muses over the relationships between a mother and child, too. When she considers her love to Sula, she becomes aware of the huge difference between liking and loving her, and thus she enters a field of mother-daughter relationships that is veiled by both a kind of commonplace and timid whispering. Within the context of slavery and segregation, the care for one’s own children and othermothering were nothing unique in the African-American community. Eva, though “operating on a private scheme of preference and prejudice, sent off for children she had seen from the balcony of her bedroom or whose circumstances she had heard about from the gossipy old men who came to play checkers or read the *Courier*, or write her number” (Morrison 37). Thus, Eva also becomes puzzled when Hannah asks her about loving Plum and her because for her it seems to be difficult to understand Hannah’s doubts about maternal feelings. Anyway, these Hannah’s doubts do not mean that she belittles the significance of being a mother. She questions, in a way almost dogmatic, rule of inexhaustible mother love and, though not through the direct confrontation with almost any one else than Eva and partly

Sula, she reveals the question that seems to be considerably important. Yet, when Sula hears her, as a child, speaking about that, she must confront something she cannot understand at all and which only hurts her.

The climactic point of the Peace women seems to come with Sula. When she comes back to the town after ten years, she immediately begins to be understood as evil by the wide community. People do not understand her and because she does not do even little to change it, they tend to spread the made up stories about her. Within the context of her intimate relationships, she makes the town women hate her. Her relationships with their men do not flatter them anymore because none of the men seems to be interesting enough to catch Sula's attention for longer time. "The fury she created in the women of the town was incredible – for she would lay their husbands once and then no more. Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgment, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised" (Morrison 115).

In conclusion, Hannah represents a distinctive individual who made the women's love to their men glitter and shine, while Sula acts in their eyes as a devil who scoffs at it. Face to face with Sula's presence, the women delimit themselves against Sula to demonstrate that they are different, better. However, their behavior is distinguished by noticeable heaviness and their position is simply reinforced by hate, grudge and fear.

#### **4. 2. Sula vs. the townspeople**

Men do not hesitate to join the women in their unity against Sula and in the end they are those who give her the final label. For the Bottom people there are a high number of reasons to delimit against Sula, including her physical beauty and grace. However, the reasons finally considered crucial by the people are these three: Eva having been put in the institution, Jude definitely leaving the town, and within the context of a plague of robins, the tale of her watching burning Hannah. Certainly, all of these three may be in a way reasons to condemn Sula but there seems to be hardly any effort of the town people to understand her. The only person who does not leave her for a long time is Nel, but that lasts only until she finds Jude with Sula in their bedroom.

Sula's final label is represented by the accusation of her sleeping with white men. Town men "were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing – the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men" (Morrison 112). Considering the previous mention of bruised pride and vanity, it seems to be almost unequivocal that the men's desire to blemish Sula may be driven by some offended complexes. Nevertheless, suddenly both men and women have an offence in common and it seems to represent an essential background of their acting toward Sula.

Within the context of Sula's accusation, Toni Morrison continues: "It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was obviously capable of it. In any case, all minds were closed to her when that word was passed around. It made the old women draw their lips together; made small children look away from her in shame; made young men fantasize elaborate torture for her – just to get the saliva back in their mouths when they saw her. Every one of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections – Sula underneath some white man – and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier. The fact that their own skin color was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did" (112-113).

People do not like Sula, who does the things they consider bad, which is their absolute right. On the other hand, the fact is that they need a lie which they can center around. Despite the reality that Sula put Eva away, slept with Jude and watched Hannah in flames, nobody knows whether she sleeps with white men or not. "It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was obviously capable of it" (Morrison 112). Their assumption that Sula may be able to do it is the only point they seem to be certain of.

The community appears to need Sula (or anyone else) who would represent evil. It reminds them of their unity, mutual love and the good in their lives. They delimit themselves against Sula to prove they are different and somehow better, but it all finishes with her death. All of them, without regard to how much they have pretended to differ from her, go back to their previous behavior. False morality that was built on surmise and probable lie falls into ruins because people did not change in order to improve their characters and mutual relationships but only to persuade themselves of their own perfection.

People's reaction to Sula's presumed sexual intercourses with white men is not entirely unexpected. Within the context of what has been already said, "although both Black and white women were slaves under patriarchy, the particular enslavement of Black women was also an attack on all Black people" (Omolade 7-8). At the time of segregation African-Americans still considered relationship between white men and Black women rape or immorality though this rule was not applied in relationships between Black men and white women. Old women draw the lips together because it spoils all their previous efforts and beliefs; small children feel ashamed though they really do not understand why; and all Black men and women immediately condemn Sula who betrays their infinite effort to resist the white system and its humiliating rules. They feel that their struggle to white supremacy is weakened by the betrayal of one of them and it appears unacceptable for them ever to forgive her. On the other hand, the fact that Sula is blamed for something that is so unequivocally reprehensible within the whole community provokes the need to consider whether it is really true or only an easy means how to manipulate with other people in order to set them against her. Town people do not mind that some of the Bottom men sleep with white women or, better to say, they do not speak about that. In this way, they do not measure that supposed act of Sula by the same yardstick as the similarly promiscuous behavior on the part of their men. Thus, it does not seem to be only an individual's failure as such but especially female failure that outrages these accusers without regard to their gender.

Sula's position in the Bottom is full of contradiction. People hang together against her, which seemingly revives and improves their own familial and neighborly relationships. Thus, she participates actively in the development of the community/society. She destroys stereotypes and violates dogmas and simultaneously, she becomes ostracized. In



addition, people who try to weaken her influence paradoxically exaggerate the impact of her most futile and negligible act. On the other hand, Sula does not yearn for their company and she welcomes the ostracism expressed by her neighbors. She enjoys her loneliness because it is only her own and that makes her proud. She represents an incredibly strong individuality that for her otherness cannot participate in the society in a common way.

Sula irritates people because she shows them their imperfections which they consider perfect. They try to eliminate her for they do not know that it is also she who causes the development of their community. She can make them move, find different ways and extend their minds and she also partly does that: "Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious way. 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" (Morrison 117-118). Nevertheless, people do not recognize that opportunity fully and only strengthen their hypocrisy (that is neither recognized nor admitted by them). They establish their renewed unity on frustration and allegation and therefore it all finishes as soon as Sula dies.

After her death "mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair. Daughters who had complained bitterly about the responsibilities of taking care of their aged mothers-in-law had altered when Sula lock Eva away, and they began cleaning those old women's spittoons without a murmur. Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. And even those Negroes who had moved down from Canada to Medallion, who remarked every chance they got that they had never been slaves, felt a loosening of their reactionary compassion for Southern-born blacks Sula had inspired in them. They returned to their original claims of superiority" (Morrison 153-154).

One of the most blatant examples of hypocrisy is represented by Teapot's mother. She is also the first who becomes to change her indifference into pretended goodness. One day, when Teapot comes to Sula to see if she has some bottles, he falls down the steps. His mother can see Sula bending over him and she assesses the situation according to the general belief in Sula's bad character. So she tells everybody that Sula pushed him, she abides the advice of her friends and takes him into the hospital. Teapot has two fractures but it was "poor diet that contributed substantially to the daintiness of his bones" (Morrison 114). After that event Teapot's mother immerses herself in motherhood fully and she becomes sober and devoted. Yet, when Sula dies, she returns to her previous patterns of behavior and her indifference appears again. When Teapot asks her for some sugar-butter-bread, she finds out that she has only oleomargarine: "Too tired to mix the saffron-colored powder into the hard cake of oleo, she simply smeared the white stuff on the bread and sprinkled the sugar over it. Teapot tasted the difference and refused to eat it. This keenest of insults that a mother can feel, the rejection by a child of her food, bent her into fury and she beat him as she had not done since Sula knocked him down the steps" (Morrison 153).

#### **4. 3. Sula Peace and Nel Wright**

As already mentioned, Sula does not yearn for the presence of other people and she admires her loneliness. Yet, there is one person who she loves unconditionally and fully and it is Nel. Sula and Nel represent two parts of an inseparable unit which together comprises one person. Though it may appear contradictory at first, they both introduce the opposites that mutually create their personalities.

For the first reading, readers may easily get the idea of Nel being good and Sula bad though that would be a rather shallow interpretation. Toni Morrison herself "stated that, in *Sula*, she 'was interested ... in doing a very old, worn-out idea, which was to do something with good and evil, but putting it in different terms' (qtd. in Stepto 12). In traditional terms, of course, Sula is evil and Nel is good. At worst, Sula is unbearable and, at best, unknowable to readers. Conversely, Nel becomes for readers just what she becomes for the Bottom – a reliable, likable, accessible woman. In this way, Nel is the reader's segue to Sula, her importance undeniable and two-fold: she helps draw out the peculiarities of Sula's actions and temper, and she carries the novel in a way that Sula

(because of said actions and temperament) cannot. The reciprocity between Sula and Nel is the shared responsibility of serving as protagonist” (Galehouse).

Their relationship is sometimes understood as homosexual and, in a way, it may be comprehended as such. On the other hand, “Morrison insisted during the Tate interview that there ‘is no homosexuality in *Sula*’ (157). Nevertheless, she depicts a similarly climactic, if only symbolic, scene between Nel and Sula when the girls join together in what they call ‘grass play’: ‘In concert, without ever meeting each other’s eyes, they stroked the blades up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. When a generous clearing was made, Sula traced intricate patterns in it with her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. Sula copied her, and soon each had a hole size of a cup. Nel began a more strenuous digging and, rising to her knee, was careful to scoop out the dirt as she made her hole deeper. Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same’ (Morrison 58). Rather than allowing this erotic ‘grass play’ to move from the representational to the actual, Morrison metaphorically buries the potential for a sexual relationship between her two characters. When Nel’s twig breaks she throws the pieces into the depression with ‘a gesture of disgust’ (Morrison 58). Sula throws hers in as well and, together, the two girls ‘replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass. Neither one had spoken a word’ (Morrison 59). Shortly thereafter the girls witness a literal death, Chicken Little’s drowning, the event that marks their entrance to adulthood” (Fulton).

Yet, there are some interpretations which support the idea of homosexuality and they are not completely wrong in a way they analyze Sula and Nel’s friendship. “As Sula’s childhood confidante, Nel functions much like a sister, someone whose presence Sula never fundamentally questions. Some critics go further, arguing, as Barbara Smith does, that *Sula* can legitimately be read as a lesbian text: ‘It works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison’s consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage and the family’ (165). Insofar as *Sula* is about communication between characters, Smith’s reading is apt. Much of the inventiveness of the novel stems

from the ultimate subordination of heterosexual romance. In addition, the only real epiphany in *Sula* belongs to Nel and occurs in relation to her estranged love for Sula. Yet some argue against Smith's analysis. For example, Alisha R. Coleman maintains that Smith has misread the emotional intimacy drawn between these two female characters. Coleman's psychoanalytic reading asserts that the friendship between Sula and Nel makes *Sula* a feminist novel in which the two women complement or complete one another, generating two halves of a personality that combine to form a whole psyche" (Galehouse).

Sula and Nel become estranged twice. The first alienation comes up when they are at the Chicken Little's funeral; the second when Nel finds Sula and Jude in their bedroom. In order to explain the first estrangement, it is necessary to look at the Bottom community as such. "At Chicken's funeral, we realize that something is wrong in the community. As Reverend Deal preaches, the members of the community mourn not for the dead child, but for themselves: 'They did not hear all of what he said; they heard the one word, or phrase, or inflection that was for them the connection between the event and themselves. For some it was the term 'Sweet Jesus'. And they saw the Lamb's eye and the truly innocent victim: themselves' (Morrison 65). This image of individuals mourning only for themselves is intensified in Nel. She stands even more removed from the mourning process because she, afraid of being caught, separates herself from Sula and casts herself as the innocent victim: '... she knew that she had done nothing' (Morrison 65). Though Nel will reconcile with Sula after the funeral, during the ritual, she leaves Sula completely alone for the first time: 'Nel and Sula did not touch hands or look at each other during the funeral. There was a space, a separateness, between them' (Morrison 64) (Jones).

Yet, as mentioned in previous analysis of Nel, she finally comes back to Sula and does not mark herself as a victim anymore. It is Eva, who shows her how much close she is to Sula. After her visit in the institution, Nel, more than ten years after Sula's death, admits to herself that she is not an innocent victim and Sula a culprit. She realizes again the good feeling that she had when Chicken Little drowned and she moves back to Sula and their mutual inseparability.

The second and longer-lasting alienation happens when Sula returns to the Bottom. Nel feels abandoned after she finds out that Sula slept with Jude and she gives up meeting her. Sula's sexual interaction with Nel's husband is incomprehensible to Nel and she does not and cannot appreciate Sula's perspective. For Sula, sleeping with Jude is not personal but experimental. She does not want to hurt Nel; sexuality is for her the place where she recovers the self – the self on which she can depend. “By posing this radical possibility that women friends could and should share male lovers, even in the context of wedlock, Morrison intentionally creates and endorses an alternative to heteronormative romantic love based in jealous possession. As she said: ‘You see, if all woman behaved like those two, or if the Sula’s point of view operated and women really did not care about sharing these things, everything would just crumble – hard. If it is not about fidelity and possession and my pain versus yours, then how can you assert power? I went someplace once to talk about *Sula* and there were some genuinely terrified men in the audience, and they walked out and told me why. They said, ‘Friendship between women?’ Aghast. Really terrified.’ Like Morrison, Sula realizes that the world – or more singularly, Nel – cannot accept such a philosophy yet. On her deathbed, she tells Nel that after something, some violent event, turns the world upside down, ‘then there’ll be a little love left over for me. And I know what it will feel like” (Morrison 146) (Fulton).

Nel begins to appreciate Sula's perspective, but only after Sula dies. “As she returns from the cemetery one day, Nel senses the presence of Sula's spirit and finally realizes that while ‘all that time, [she] thought [she] was missing Jude,’ she actually longed for Sula, her best friend, the other half of her soul. The acknowledge of her loss causes her to cry out, ‘O Lord, Sula ... girl, girl, girlgirlgirl’ (Morrison 174), and the two again merge, visually and textually, into the oneness of friendship as the sound of Nel's lamentation fades away” (Fulton).

Nevertheless, after the experience with Sula and Jude in the bedroom Nel becomes even more estranged. Simultaneously, her behavior begins to resemble her mother Helen against whom she has tried to delimit so much and in her opinion on Sula, she joins the Bottom people. “It had surprised her [Sula] a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have” (Morrison 120). Nel becomes an immediate representative of the Bottom community and she feels harmed.

#### 4. 4. Revolutionary suicide

African-American community has been often characterized by the existence of mystic symbolism and by the strong belief in it. The Christian concept of God has been interconnected with the African tradition and both these ways fully complemented each other. Much in the spirit of this ecumenical mix of pagan and Christian signification, Sula's return, accompanied by a plague of robins, reminds people of a bad sign and besides, it is a sign of death of which Sula becomes the center. They will always remember her within the context of evil days. "In spite of the fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that border on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also they were with people" (Morrison 89-90).

These people's reactions describe a kind of passive resistance that existed within African-Americans during the slavery and which represents one of the most important aspects of the survival for them as for an oppressed group. "What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. [...] The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn't stone sinners for the same reason they didn't commit suicide – it was beneath them" (Morrison 90).

Yet, the term suicide is by African-Americans accepted, though in a completely different way. "Meaning of the word is aligned with black power rather than powerlessness and it becomes to be defined as a revolutionary suicide. The word *revolutionary* transforms the word *suicide* into an idea that has different dimensions and meanings. The emphasis on the transformative aspect of *revolutionary* prevents *suicide* from slipping into submission to a hostile, governing culture; and the insistence on suicide testifies to the severe and likely repercussions of black resistance. The concept of revolutionary suicide is not defeatist or fatalistic. On the contrary, it conveys an awareness of reality in combination with the possibility of hope-reality" (Ryan).

The approach connected with revolutionary suicide certainly influences the stance that people adopted on Sula. For evil concludes a wide range of demonstrations, they behave to her as to any other disaster. Yet, and though, Sula mocks and provokes them, she still remains one of them because no society can exist without its particular human beings and no human being can keep its real essence without contact with other people. Nevertheless, her presence gives rise to community alarm and she evokes a sense of fear in other people who, driven by that feeling, consider her an enemy.

Within the context of the mystic symbolism that have been deeply rooted in the African-American culture together with the African-Americans' (though sometimes not realized) passive resistance, people protect themselves from Sula in their own way. "So they laid broomsticks across their doors at night and sprinkled salt on porch steps. But aside from one or two unsuccessful efforts to collect the dust from her footsteps, they did nothing to harm her. As always the black people looked at evil stony-eyed and let it run" (Morrison 113). On the other hand, "they watched her far more closely than they watched any other roach or bitch in the town, and their alertness was gratified when the things began to happen" (Morrison 113). In general, for African-Americans at the time of slavery and later segregation "the presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over" (Morrison 118); and in this way people from the Bottom behave to Sula. In addition, and because they know that in this case they represent the majority and she stays alone, they seem to enjoy the feeling of the superior ones, showing off their seeming goodness.

"From the beginning of her return to the Bottom, Sula is perceived as evil-so evil and the townspeople believe that she has supernatural powers" (Galehouse). Her birthmark makes her different from other people and the day of her return is different from other days, too. "Accompanied by a plague of robins, Sula came back to Medallion. The little yam-breasted shuddering birds were everywhere, exciting very small children away from their usual welcome into a vicious stoning" (Morrison 89). "Sula's return is greeted with a stoning, a punishment traditionally reserved for the public humiliation of a criminal or, more to the point, a witch. In addition, Sula's re-arrival becomes linked to the physical accidents of others. When Teapot comes to Sula's door, he hurts himself. And when Mr. Finley, who had sucked on chicken bones for years, looks up to see Sula in the distance, he chokes on a chicken bone and dies. The result of all these incidents is that Sula comes

to be regarded as the local incarnation of evil, a pariah who effects and creates change and catastrophe within the social and natural worlds. She allows the Bottom to create its own bottom-to build, in the collective rejection of her, a frame of social rules over which it can stretch its convictions. In other words, the people of the Bottom facilitate Sula's paradox: because they believe her to be evil, she provides for them an antidote to themselves. It is only because the community believes in evil as a matter of course that it is able to cast Sula in the role of pariah at all. As Christian concludes, 'since she [Sula] does not fit the image of mother, the loose woman, or the lady-wife, the community relegates her to their other category for woman, that of the witch, the evil conjure woman who is a part of the evil forces of Nature' (54). Sula becomes the woman the Bottom loves to hate and, in hating her, Sula's seductiveness is never stronger" (Galehouse). Yet, that does not seem to be enough and people use the first opportunity to condemn her in unison again. When the men gives her final label and say that she slept with white men, nobody asks for the proof because it does not seem to be important to them. "It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been" (Morrison112).

Sula is not well-liked by the people but accepted by them as necessary evil. Not only is she free, independent and beautiful, but also single and without children. She chooses her own way despite the given rules and it puts her into the opposition; she decides freely if she wants to be a mother, wife, educated, occupied, alone, or anything else. In the late 1930s she is already allowed to choose, though only little and fully under the white supremacy. Yet, one of the biggest problems is represented by the African-American community as such because to white Americans she is only a burden but for the Bottom people she has grown away, betrayed their efforts to survive the oppressive evil and trampled their pride. Within the context of motherhood and othermothering, Sula seems to undermine one of the very basic pillars of the African-American resistance and thus, in their point of view, supports the white majority. Eva, though in a little arguable way, considered children the center of her life; Sula, as the center of her life, regards herself. Finally, it is her refusal to follow more or less traditional concept of marriage/partnership and family life that emphasizes both her natural and also by other people supported otherness.

People cannot accept and understand Sula's otherness and therefore they call her evil, which might be defined as one of the biggest problems of the society in general.



Xenophobia that originates in fear and results in intolerance sets frightened people against one another and makes them blind. They consider evil something or somebody else and they cannot see that the real evil hides in them and their behavior.

#### **4. 5. National Suicide Day**

As already said, Sula is not the only person who has been defined as evil by the people. The second one is Shadrack but he represents a little different kind of social exclusion. By the town people they are both considered devils, but Sula is seen as bad and calculating and Shadrack as insane, annoying and ridiculous. Nevertheless, both these idiosyncratic individuals seek solitude and that is another point that puts them closer.

As already mentioned, Shadrack institutes National Suicide Day “which merges into the Bottom calendar; the people ‘absorbed it into their thoughts, into their language, into their lives’ (Morrison 15). Shadrack’s annual holiday encourages people to avoid death’s random blows and free themselves of fear, to control death and resist disorder by killing themselves. Yet, it is not until 1941, the novel’s penultimate chapter, that the ritual ends in actual deaths (Ryan).

“Perhaps because of his gender, his war history, and his solitary ways, Shadrack is incorporated into the Bottom routine. ‘Because Shadrack’s madness involves only a different way of structuring the community’s sense of time and ritual, rather than an actual disintegration of order, he is assimilated more easily into the community’s life than Sula, who, in contrast, challenges the community’s collective identity,’ remarks Cedric Gael Bryant (734). Bryant goes on to argue that ‘Shadrack is also less threatening than Sula because eventually his madness, while at first frightening, ceases to be dangerous once he has been assigned a place in the community’s life’ (734-35). Shadrack’s assiduous isolation serves as a silencing, protective shield around his person because it manifests itself randomly and sporadically, while Sula’s independence lays her open to the Bottom’s scrutiny” (Galehouse).

Shadrack’s personal deal with the Death becomes public event and as such a part of the Bottom people’s lives. Its regular timing and repeated process cause the formation of the ritual that is more or less mocked but generally perceived and accepted. “On the third day

of the new year, he walked through the Bottom down Carpenter's Road with a cowbell and a hangman's rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other. At first the people in the town were frightened; they knew Shadrack was crazy but that did not mean that he didn't have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power. His eyes were so wild, his hair so long and matted, his voice was so full of authority and thunder that he caused panic on the first, or Charter, National Suicide Day in 1920. [...] As time went along, the people took less notice of these January thirds, or rather they thought they did, thought they had no attitudes or feelings one way or another about Shadrack's annual solitary parade. In fact they had simply stopped remarking on the holiday because they had already absorbed it" (Morrison 15).

Rituals as such represent the type of acting that is possible only within the assembled group of people and their role is to encourage, sustain or change concrete mental condition of the group. Each person contains of two personalities: individual, with its narrowly delineated activity, and social, which represents the highest value of intellectual and moral system, i.e. the society. Each individual participates in the society as much as he/she exceeds himself/herself in both thinking and acting. (Durkheim, *Elementary* 17-24). Thus, Shadrack tries to encourage the people, who "did not believe death was accidental – life might be, but death was deliberate" (Morrison 90), with their unexpected and random dying to leave at the concrete time which has been designated for that; and he attempts to sustain this rule. Personally, Shadrack's contract with the Death results from the uncertainty that he gained from the war experience; that showed him how fragile and ephemeral human life is. In a minute, people you have just talked to can run away but their open mouths are not to finish once commenced words.

There are three basic types of rituals – negative, positive, and of conciliation – and all of them relates to and mutually presuppose one another. Negative rituals require abstinence, it means negative acting, and they have the form of ban and taboo (Durkheim, *Elementary* 327-28). On the other hand, people never believed that their duties to the ritual addressee have been based only on denial and always thought that their relationship also resulted from delight. This function of enjoyment is attributed to positive rituals that should support reciprocal and positive relationships (Durkheim, *Elementary* 356). These positive rituals are characterized by trust, joy and enthusiasm. However, sad rituals and

festivities that exist in order to confront a catastrophe appear too and they take place in the state of concern or grief. These are called of conciliation (Durkheim, *Elementary* 419-420).

Shadrack's National Suicide Day relates to the rituals of conciliation mainly. Despite the fact how frightened and mischievous people were, Shadrack's solitary walk keeps the basic characteristics of rituals and as such influences social life and collective thinking. People do not delimit themselves against Shadrack in the same way as against Sula. They would probably even refuse any bigger impact on their lives because they consider Sula dangerous but Shadrack insane. Yet, it all changes with the last Suicide Day when, finally, its content seems to come true.

When Shadrack sees Sula's dead body, he resigns. He starts to revise the effort he has made to deal with the Death and he begins "to suspect that all those years of rope hauling and bell ringing were never going to do any good. [...] By his day-slashed calendar he knew that tomorrow was the day. And for the first time he did not want to go. He wanted to stay with the purple-and-white belt. Not go. Not go" (Morrison 158). Shadrack has considered the Suicide Day doing the common good to people around, but having seen Sula's dead body, he feels betrayed. He realizes that the death contract does not work.

He loses his interest in the society and does not any longer care whether he helps the people or not. His resignation oscillates between the personal victory over the war hallucinations and complete personal failure which was caused by the fact that his effort has not been understood properly. Yet, he decides to go: "Drenched in sunlight and certain that this would be the last time he would invite them to end their lives neatly and sweetly, he walked over the rickety bridge and on into the Bottom" (Morrison 158).

Catastrophe of the last Suicide Day seems to be pure coincidence. On the other hand, as if the Death suddenly remembers the contract with Shadrack and people die at the time reserved to it. Nevertheless, none of them wants to die. They enjoy the sunshine that appears after long winter; they laugh and dance, while Shadrack continues in his gloomy ringing. "The deweys with their magnificent teeth ran out from Number 7 and danced a little jig around the befuddled Shadrack, then cut into a wild aping of his walk, his song and his bell-ringing. By now women were holding their stomachs, and the men were

slapping their knees. It was Mrs. Jackson, who ate ice, who tripped down off her porch and marched – actually marched – along behind him. The scene was so comic the people walked into the road to make sure they saw it all. In that way the parade started” (Morrison 159).

People transform Shadrack’s annual ritual of conciliation into the positive ritual and that contrasts sharply with the Death that suddenly appears on the stage. Not all the people go to the tunnel, but many of those who do so die there. Though Shadrack did not want to go anywhere, the content of his long-lasting ritual finally seems to come true and the previous mockery changes into the anxious cry of dying people who “went too deep, too far” (Morrison 162). Shadrack watches the people and he can see how his words get the concrete form. Though he has already cancelled that, he knows that the Death performs the conditions of the contract, and he seems to become wordless. “Having forgotten his song and his rope, he [Shadrack] just stood there high up on the bank ringing, ringing his bell” (Morrison 162).

Within the context of revolutionary suicide, there is a direct link between the final tunnel destruction and the idea of killing and death. “The killing motivation compels the people further than they had intended: ‘They didn’t mean to go in, to actually go down into the lip of the tunnel, but in their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin-armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep’ (Morrison 161-62). Even if Shadrack’s followers did not mean to go in, they did. The progression toward the tunnel corresponds with the claim that suicide always involves murderous impulses turned inward. Charter Suicide Day did, in fact, include the option of homicide: Shadrack explained that this was ‘their only chance to kill themselves or each other’ (Morrison 14). The Bottom residents are not, however, interested in killing each other but in ‘wip[ing] from the face of the earth’ the unfinished sign of their economic disenfranchisement (Ryan).

The climax of Shadrack’s Suicide Day is characterized by collective death and delight changed into the malice and rage: “Led by the tough, the enraged and the young they picked up the lengths of timbre and thin steel ribs and smashed the bricks they would never fire in yawning kilns, split the sacks of limestone they had not mixed or even been

allowed to haul” (Morrison 161). “Shadrack’s previously solo performance ends with people crushed and drowned in the New River Road tunnel. Designed to pre-empt death, Suicide Day leads not to glorified, individual deaths but to a political protest in which identity is collective: The bodies of the indistinguishable Deweys are never found, and no one knows who went first” (Ryan).

The outcome of the long repeated ritual contrasts with the joy that people feel when they march and dance in the afternoon sunshine. That winter was long and bad and the warm sun lets them ignore the real meaning of Shadrack’s ringing. Moreover, nobody except him can see the Death standing on the river shore, waiting for the people and keeping its word. Dazzled by the sun and having forgotten Shadrack completely, they go to meet their fates.

## 5. SOCIAL PARADOXES

Paradox and irony of the story appears at the very beginning and it seems to be even built into the landscape. The prelude describes the neighborhood called Bottom and the “nigger joke” connected to its beginning. As mentioned in the preface, the original Black community was deceived by a white farmer who promised them “freedom and a piece of bottom land” (Morrison 5) but the land they finally got was at the top of the hill. Though it was dry and hard to cultivate, by the farmer it was presented as the bottom of heaven with the most arable soil. “In a discussion of the folk tradition out of which Morrison writes, Barbara Christian notes: ‘Like the ancestral African tradition, place is as important as the human actors, for the land is a participant in the maintenance of the folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constants through which the folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it passed on from the generation to the next. Setting, then, is organic to the characters’ view of themselves’ (Galehouse).

People from the Bottom absorbed the paradox of “nigger joke” entirely and it seems to have an impact on both their social and private lives. They can laugh at themselves and rise above the sad reality of white supremacy. On the other hand, considering themselves victims, they become self-pitying and sentimental. They consider themselves better than white Americans, and also better than the individuals who are represented (for instance) by Sula and Shadrack. Particularly within their own relationships, most of them appear unable to laugh at their own acting and give up that victim self-portrait. It is possible to say that the only one who can laugh at herself is Sula and Nel represents another exceptional one who finally gets rid of the mentioned self-pity.

As already said, Shadrack and Sula are introduced as the only two particular people from the Bottom in the prelude. Paradox occurs also in their relationship that seems to be built on it. “Morrison constructs a mutually beneficial bond by allowing them to share a similar moment. After Chicken Little drowns, Sula is spurred by a child’s terror of being caught in an act of wrongdoing and runs to Shadrack’s house to see if he witnessed the event. When she enters the house, its order and restfulness amaze her. While taking in this initial lesson about the inaccuracy of preconceptions, she speculates: Perhaps this was not the house of the Shad. The terrible Shad who walked about with his penis out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children, the only black who could curse white people and get away with it (Morrison 61-62). Shadrack then returns to find Sula in his

home and, rather than scolding her, he nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in a pleasant conversational tone, a tone of cooled butter, Always.” (Morrison 62) (Fulton).

Sula thinks that Shadrack answered a question she did not ask. Thus, Morrison “initially leads readers to believe that Shadrack’s always means that he will keep Sula’s secret. Later, however, it becomes clear that his remark means something quite different to both him and Sula. Shadrack knows that Sula ‘had wanted something – from him. Not fish not work, but something only he could give’ (Morrison 156), and he decides that she wants him to reassure her of the existence of an afterlife. Consequently, he says ‘always’ so that ‘she would not have to be afraid of the change – the falling away of skin, the drip and slide of blood, and the exposure of bone underneath. He has said ‘always’ to convince her, assure her, of permanency’ (Morrison 157). Shadrack, then, effectively answers a question that Sula did not even think to ask, one concerning Chicken Little’s fate, and his answer somehow helps her and Nel to live with the consequences of their actions” (Fulton).

Sula and Shadrack differ from each other a lot but they have also a lot in common. They are the individuals who unsettle the community and its life; they both represent its very active driving elements. One of the ideas that, among all, also unite them is the one of a paper doll. When Ajax, with whom Sula felt in love, leaves, “faced with this loss, she becomes like the headless soldier that Shadrack sees his first day in the war. Sula’s body goes on, but she has lost her head, just like the paper dolls. Sula’s headless paper dolls indicate Sula’s having lost herself, having given up her name, to Ajax and her being unable to ‘hold her head up,’ to maintain herself in the face of this loss: ‘I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls’ (Morrison 136). The image of paper dolls also suggest emptiness of body, mind, and soul, and that emptiness leads to Sula’s death” (Jones) as well as to the Shadrack’s lost interest in the society and his reluctance to the Suicide Day he once began.

Not only can Shadrack’s and Sula’s be seen as an embodiment of emptiness, seeking solitude and lost interest in other people, but they also share a great deal of irony and paradox in it. Within the context of Sula, it appears in her providing an antidote to the people around her. They seem to improve their relationships with other people but only

during her life. After her death, they begin to behave in the same way as they did before Sula returned to the town as adult. In this way, they seem to be polite to each other only because they share the vision of common enemy, not for those relationships themselves. When speaking of Shadrack, the paradox culminates when he decides to stop the Suicide Day ritual, but finally overcomes his distaste and goes to do it for the last time. At that time his words come true and afternoon sunshine sharply contrasts with the helplessness of dying people, who literally danced to their death.



## 6. CONCLUSION

Bottom community represents a group of people that is forced to live under the supremacy of white Americans and whose rights are restricted by Jim Crow laws. The group is also characteristic for its ecumenical mix of pagan and Christian concept of God that influences their viewing of life and its events largely. The very beginning of the community is connected with injustice and mockery; it is based on a lie and irony that gradually seem to be absorbed by the people themselves. Not only do they lie to themselves when showing off their apparent perfection within their relationships, but they also need a lie to delimit against Sula fully. Thus, the Bottom people appear to refuse the behavior of white Americans but simultaneously they, sometimes, “behave with precisely the same venom that white people did” (Morrison 112-113). That occurs mainly when they accuse Sula of sleeping with white men – while at the same time they pass in silence the sexual intercourses of the Bottom men with white women deliberately.

Within the context of slavery and white supremacy, though frightened and constantly humiliated, African-Americans generally considered themselves rather strong. They were unified because of having a common enemy represented by white Americans and they were firm in the way they resisted it. That way they defied the system generally transformed into passive resistance and revolutionary suicide because “the purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined [...] to survive” (Morrison 90). When speaking of the Bottom community, people consider themselves strong but simultaneously, feeling like victims, they pity themselves deeply. For they cannot rub out the presence of white people, they try to eliminate them from their lives. Similarly, they also cope with Sula and Shadrack. Though they cannot abide them, they do not exclude them from the community completely. They only tend to move them to the social periphery from where their influence can appear less significant. On the other hand, as already said, neither Sula nor Shadrack regret their own solitude.

Title of the thesis depicts individuality as a driving element of the social development and the thesis itself proceeds from the point that everybody represents this element. According to Émile Durkheim, all individuals participate in the development of society, no matter if their activity is active or passive and they create its real and final picture. Thus, there seems to be no question if individuals can live outside of the society, the question is rather in which society they want to live. To summarize that, it is necessary to

look again at both, particular characters analyzed here and the Bottom community as such.

When speaking of Eva, she struggles mainly for her survival within the American society. She obviously does not change American laws disadvantaging African-Americans but she is adamant in a way she forces the system that would otherwise let her fall through the social sieve. In that way she also resists the system by following the tradition of othermothering. Within the context of the Bottom community in particular, Eva's contribution appears enormous. She shakes a train of events not only by killing Plum and (probably) Hannah, but also by naming people around her (Deweys).

To follow the order of individual analyses, Hannah is the one who should be mentioned next. She participates in the final picture of the community she lives in mainly through her relationships with men and women of her neighborhood. Her attitude to these people is characterized by the lack of jealousy and no need to be possessive. As described before, though all that remains accepted only partly, it means a great deal of Hannah's active contribution to the community life. Another point of her contribution is represented by reflections about the feelings she experiences toward Sula. Though Hannah's awareness of differences between loving and liking one's own children makes her influence Eva and Sula chiefly, for all these women it represents one of the most important moments of their lives.

Within the context of Sula, she participates in the community life hugely and it is mainly her overwhelming otherness that represents her contribution. She represents an element that drives the community; she unsettles the people and makes them move. That is, for instance, visible through the people's effort to prove their mutual relationships on the background of Sula's behavior that they refuse. She makes them irritated but they simultaneously feel (in a way) flattered for she gives them the opportunity to consider themselves better than her.

On the other hand, Nel, acting as Sula's counterpart, seems to be rather passive with her contribution. She obviously participates in the community life too but her behavior mainly follows the patterns prepared for her by other people. Nevertheless, despite the fact that she appears under the influence of these people, she represents an element that

finally moves the story itself. In the end, Nel ceases to consider herself a victim and she becomes reconciled not only with Sula but also with herself. And these two points represent her main contribution.

Lastly, there is Shadrack who seems to influence everybody without exceptions. He has his own concrete idea about the community he would like to live in and he participates actively in its final picture. Thus, National Suicide Day represents not only his effort to let people avoid accidental and sudden death, but also help them, in this way, live safer lives. Shadrack also affects Sula's life enormously when he answers the question she did not ask.

In conclusion, all the particular people mentioned above represent individuals who participate in the Bottom life and who are considered its inseparable part. Though some of them annoy other people, none of their acting can be understood as pure evil; they do not destroy the community but make it move ahead. They also do not represent a group that would be united against the rest of the community. They act as distinct individuals and as such they are considered by other people. Only sometimes they become connected to them, as in case of Sula and Shadrack. To conclude that completely, it is necessary to point out that not only do these particular individuals become influenced by the community, but also vice versa. For they all share the place they live in and do not exclude anybody completely, they become influenced mutually; and thus each of them represents a driving element of their social/community development.

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