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A Study of Morrison's *Sula* under Sartrean Lens

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) is a powerful exploration of Black female identity, freedom, and existential alienation. This paper attempts to examine the novel through the existentialist philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, focusing on themes such as bad faith, freedom, otherness, and authenticity. Sartre's framework offers a compelling method of analyzing Sula Peace, the novel's enigmatic protagonist, as a character who resists social determinism and chooses radical freedom in a world governed by racial and gender norms. The study argues that Sula exemplifies Sartre's concept of being-for-itself through her defiance of societal conventions and pursuit of self-defined existence, even when that freedom leads to existential isolation.

Keywords: *Toni Morrison, Sula, Jean-Paul Sartre, existentialism, freedom, bad faith, otherness, authenticity*

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a seminal work of African American literature that navigates the complexities of Black female subjectivity in a racially segregated society. At its core, the novel interrogates how a Black woman might construct an autonomous identity within a society shaped by racial oppression, patriarchal expectation, and communal moral codes. Sula Peace emerges as a protagonist who consistently refuses to define herself through imposed categories such as daughter, wife, mother, or martyr. Instead, she actively chooses to shape her essence through lived experience—a radical existential stance echoing Jean-Paul Sartre's dictum that "existence precedes essence" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 22). Sula's choice to leave the Bottom, to live freely and amorally by the town's standards, and to return without seeking redemption or justification aligns with Sartre's concept of *authenticity*, wherein one embraces the full weight of one's freedom and responsibility. Her deathbed declaration—"It didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel" (Morrison 149)—reflects a life lived without regret, without appeals to external validation, and without evasion of the consequences of choice. She dies, not as a tragic figure, but as one who has fully embraced the anguish and exhilaration of freedom. In contrast to characters who conform to societal roles in bad faith, Sula lives authentically, making her a compelling existential heroine within both African American literature and the broader philosophical tradition. While much of the critical focus on *Sula* emphasizes its feminist and racial dimensions, reading it through the philosophical lens of Jean-Paul Sartre reveals Morrison's engagement with deeper ontological and existential concerns. Sartre's philosophy, particularly from *Being and Nothingness*, explores the nature of human freedom, the construction of self, and the inherent tension between individual choice and societal expectation. Applying Sartre's existentialism to *Sula* allows us to reconceptualize the titular character not merely as a symbol of rebellion or deviance but as an existential agent grappling with the anguish of radical freedom.

Existentialism and Sartre

The critical lens adopted in this study is rooted in Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy, particularly his emphasis on freedom, authenticity, and responsibility. Sartre's existentialism is grounded in the principle that "existence precedes essence," meaning that individuals are not born with predetermined identities or purposes; rather, they create their own essence through choices and actions (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 22). This framework challenges deterministic worldviews and instead foregrounds human agency and accountability.

Central to Sartre's philosophy is the notion of radical freedom. According to Sartre, "man is condemned to be free" because, in the absence of divine or universal moral authorities, each person bears full responsibility for their own existence (*Being and Nothingness* 567). Freedom is not a privilege but an inescapable condition, and every action—or inaction—is a choice. This radical freedom gives rise to anguish, as individuals must continuously choose, even in situations marked by constraint or uncertainty.

Sartre's concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is especially pertinent to literary analysis. Bad faith occurs when individuals deceive themselves into believing they have no freedom or responsibility, often by conforming to imposed roles or ideologies. This self-deception allows individuals to evade the anxiety that comes with true freedom. In contrast, authenticity, for Sartre, is the conscious acknowledgment of freedom and the willing assumption of responsibility for one's actions and identity. Authentic individuals do not hide behind societal roles or external justification but embrace the full weight of being their own authors.

Moreover, Sartre's idea of the gaze of the Other is useful in analyzing social identity. In *Being and Nothingness*, he argues that being seen by another person objectifies the self, transforming it into an object within the Other's world. This transformation often causes shame and alienation, especially in marginalized individuals whose identities are constantly constructed and judged by dominant perspectives (Sartre 340–45). Such a concept resonates with characters in literature who experience societal scrutiny and objectification, such as Morrison's Sula Peace, who defies communal definitions of morality and womanhood.

As Thomas R. Flynn notes in *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction*, Sartre's existentialism does not promote nihilism but rather a "humanism from beginning to end" (Flynn 94). This is because in choosing for oneself, an individual simultaneously proposes a model of humanity. Thus, every personal decision has ethical implications: "In fashioning myself, I fashion man" (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* 24). Flynn further elaborates in *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* that "subjective decisions change the pace of history… every individual choice is, in fact, a new beginning," suggesting that existentialism merges the personal with the political and the ethical (Flynn 103).

In applying this Sartrean framework to Toni Morrison's *Sula*, the novel can be read as an existential narrative that dramatizes the tension between individual freedom and collective morality. Sula Peace emerges as a figure of existential authenticity, one who lives in full acknowledgment of her freedom, while characters like Nel exemplify the comforts and limitations of bad faith. Morrison's fiction thus offers fertile ground for exploring existential themes such as the burden of choice, the construction of self, and the social consequences of living authentically.

Existentialism, as articulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, posits that existence precedes essence. That is, humans are not born with a fixed nature but rather define themselves through choices and actions. Central to Sartre's thought are concepts like "bad faith" (self-deception to avoid the anguish of freedom), "the look" (being objectified by others), and "authenticity" (living in accordance with one's self-defined values). For Sartre, the individual is condemned to be free — responsible for creating meaning in an absurd and indifferent universe.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre identifies two modes of being: being-in-itself (en-soi), which is static and complete (e.g., a rock), and being-for-itself (pour-soi), which refers to human consciousness that is dynamic and defined by its ability to negate, to choose, and to project possibilities. Sula Peace embodies being-for-itself in her rejection of fixed identities and social expectations.

Sula Peace as the Sartrean Outsider

Sula is a figure of radical otherness in the Bottom, the African American community where she grows up. She refuses to conform to traditional gender roles, religious expectations, or normative sexuality. In Sartrean terms, Sula resists "bad faith" by refusing to live according to the prescribed essence assigned to her by society. Unlike her best friend Nel, who chooses marriage, motherhood, and social acceptance, Sula remains single, childless, and sexually autonomous.

When Sula returns to the Bottom after ten years, her reputation as a pariah underscores the community's discomfort with her existential freedom. Sartre writes that living authentically often leads to isolation, as one is confronted with the "gaze" of the Other, which seeks to define and constrain. The community's scorn toward Sula is an example of the Sartrean "look" — the attempt of others to objectify and limit the self. Sula, however, refuses to internalize these judgments, choosing to remain true to her evolving self-concept.

Freedom and Responsibility in *Sula*

Sartre's insistence on freedom is accompanied by the notion of responsibility. One must not only act freely but also accept the consequences of those actions. Sula lives with the existential consequences of her choices — her sexual autonomy, her break from traditional morality, and her estrangement from Nel. She experiences isolation, loss, and even death, but does not renounce her freedom.

In a significant conversation with Nel, Sula says, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." This echoes Sartre's notion that individuals must take responsibility for shaping their own essence. Her choice to leave the Bottom, to explore the world, and to return without shame reflects a deep commitment to Sartrean freedom. Though her community views her as immoral, Sula does not seek redemption or apology — a gesture of existential authenticity.

Sula and Bad Faith

Sartre's existential philosophy posits that human beings are radically free—free not only to make choices but to bear the full weight of responsibility for those choices. In *Being and Nothingness*, he writes, "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre 567). This freedom, while liberating, is also a source of anxiety and existential anguish, as individuals are forced to create meaning in a world devoid of inherent structure or divine moral codes. Sula Peace exemplifies this Sartrean ideal of freedom. She chooses to reject the traditional roles assigned to Black women in her community—wife, mother, moral exemplar—and instead carves out a life governed by self-determined values. Her actions are not merely rebellious but existentially significant; they reflect a commitment to living authentically, despite the alienation and condemnation she faces.

In a pivotal conversation with Nel, Sula asserts, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison 92). This declaration is a powerful articulation of Sartre's existentialist premise that human beings are responsible for shaping their own essence through conscious choice and action. Sartre argues that "existence precedes essence," meaning that one is not born with a fixed identity but must actively construct it through lived experience (Sartre 21). Sula's decision to leave the Bottom, explore life on her own terms, and return without apology or shame exemplifies her rejection of societal definitions of womanhood and morality. Her defiance in the face of social condemnation reflects what Sartre calls "authenticity"—living in accordance with one's self-determined values rather than in "bad faith," or conformity to externally imposed roles (Sartre 59). Though the community brands her as immoral, Sula embraces her radical freedom and refuses to seek

redemption, embodying the existential ideal of being true to oneself in a world eager to impose meaning from without.

By contrast, other characters in the novel live in Sartrean "bad faith." Nel Wright, Sula's childhood companion, chooses the path of social conformity—marriage, motherhood, and respectability. For years, she believes this conformity provides stability and purpose. Yet, following her estrangement from Sula and her eventual personal disillusionment, Nel begins to realize that she has never truly lived for herself. Her conformity is revealed as a form of self-deception, a retreat from the burden of freedom. In this, Nel becomes the existential foil to Sula: where Sula embraces the anxiety of freedom, Nel seeks comfort in pre-defined roles.

Through these contrasting portraits, Morrison not only dramatizes existential themes but also interrogates the psychological cost of both authenticity and bad faith. Sula's freedom isolates her, but it also affirms her agency. Nel's conformity earns her social acceptance but ultimately leads to emotional emptiness. Sartre's philosophy, thus, provides a valuable lens to understand *Sula* not merely as a tale of friendship and estrangement, but as a profound inquiry into what it means to live freely—and responsibly—in an absurd world.

In contrast, many characters in *Sula* live in bad faith, particularly Nel Wright. Nel conforms to societal expectations and seeks validation through marriage and motherhood. For Sartre, bad faith involves surrendering one's freedom and accepting socially constructed roles as fixed truths. Nel's eventual realization of her own complicity in suppressing her authentic desires marks her awakening from bad faith.

Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, is another complex figure who oscillates between authenticity and bad faith. Though she demonstrates agency in sacrificing her leg to secure financial support for her family, her rigid moralism and harsh judgment toward Sula reflect a retreat into fixed roles of matriarchal authority.

The Death of Sula: An Existential Reckoning

Sula's death is a powerful moment of existential reflection. She dies alone but unrepentant, experiencing a moment of lucid self-awareness. Her final thoughts are not of regret but of curiosity — "Well, I'll be damned. It didn't even hurt." This moment encapsulates Sartre's belief that death is the limit of possibility, the point at which being-for-itself collapses into being-in-itself. Yet, by dying without fear or remorse, Sula affirms her authenticity to the end. While Morrison's *Sula* is deeply rooted in African American cultural and historical realities, the novel also functions on a philosophical level as an exploration of existential freedom. In the existential tradition, the hero or heroine does not conform to the archetype of moral virtue or social acceptance. Rather, the existential figure is one who confronts the absurdity of existence, assumes radical freedom, and takes responsibility for defining their own essence. Sartre asserts, "existence precedes essence," meaning that individuals are not born with a predetermined purpose—they must create themselves through actions and choices (Sartre 21).

Sula Peace fits this paradigm. She is not heroic in conventional terms—she is vilified by her community, considered immoral, and dies in solitude. However, her refusal to adhere to externally imposed roles and her embrace of individual freedom mark her as an existential heroine. She is aware of her estrangement but chooses authenticity over conformity, even when that choice leads to isolation and death. Unlike Nel, who represents the socially conditioned self, Sula resists bad faith—the Sartrean concept of self-deception where individuals deny their freedom by conforming to fixed identities (Sartre 59). She lives without apology, driven not by societal norms but by a deep desire for self-definition: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." This declaration encapsulates Sartre's existential ethics, in which the highest good is not to obey but to choose. Sula's existential heroism lies in her tragic solitude. She bears the weight of her choices and never blames society or others for her condition. Her death, marked by a sense of curiosity rather than fear, affirms Sartre's belief that even in death, the individual may face the void with dignity, not regret (Sartre 556). As such, Sula is not simply a rebellious woman; she is a philosophical exemplar of Sartrean existential freedom in a racially and culturally constrained world. Sula Peace, in Sartrean terms, is a heroine of authenticity — flawed, misunderstood, and tragic, but fiercely committed to defining her own essence. By

rejecting societal prescriptions and embracing existential freedom, Sula reveals the psychological toll and metaphysical beauty of living an authentic life. Toni Morrison's *Sula* offers a compelling reimagining of existential philosophy through the lens of Black female subjectivity. By embedding Sartre's principles of existential freedom, authenticity, and humanism within the socio-cultural fabric of the African American community in the Bottom, Morrison opens new interpretive spaces where philosophical abstraction meets lived experience. Sula Peace, as a character, refuses to surrender her agency to predetermined roles of daughter, wife, or mother; instead, she chooses to construct her identity through conscious acts of self-definition, echoing Sartre's belief that "existence precedes essence." Her decisions—to leave home, love freely, live alone, and die without regret—resonate with the Sartrean model of the authentic individual who acknowledges her freedom and embraces its consequences. Unlike characters who conform to communal norms in bad faith, Sula embodies a kind of existential courage. She bears the weight of her alienation without surrendering to victimhood or moral hypocrisy. Her life—though socially condemned—reveals a radical form of moral clarity, one grounded not in convention but in responsibility to the self. Sartre insists that our freedom is inescapable and that even passivity is a choice; Sula lives this truth unapologetically. Her death, far from signaling defeat, marks the completion of a life authentically lived—one in which she has fashioned herself entirely on her own terms.

In fusing existential humanism with the narrative of a Black woman who seeks to live authentically within a racially and morally prescriptive world, Morrison not only engages Sartre's philosophy but extends it. She critiques and recontextualizes existentialism, challenging its Eurocentric abstractions by grounding it in racialized and gendered experience. Thus, *Sula* becomes more than a literary illustration of existentialism; it is a philosophical intervention—a reclamation of freedom and selfhood by those historically denied them. Through Sula Peace, Morrison reminds us that the search for meaning is not a luxury of the privileged, but a fundamental and radical act of human resistance.

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