

# INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES IN *SULA*: THE ROLE OF ELDERS IN SHAPING COMMUNITY NARRATIVES

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of elders in shaping community narratives in Toni Morrison's *"Sula"* through the microscope of intergenerational dialogues. By analyzing key scenes, characters, and themes, the research explores how elder characters, such as Eva Peace and the Deweys, influence and shape the community's collective memory and identity. The theoretical framework minutely integrates narrative theory, the concept of "community mothers," and the dynamics of intergenerational dialogues to provide a comprehensive understanding of the novel's exploration of community identity, cultural transmission, and the power of storytelling. The findings highlight the significance of elder wisdom, intergenerational tensions, and shared spaces and rituals in the construction and preservation of the community's narrative. This study contributes to the existing scholarship on *"Sula,"* African American literature, and cultural studies, offering insights into the broader social and cultural functions of storytelling and intergenerational relationships.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational dialogues, Community narratives, African American literature, Cultural transmission, Storytelling, Collective memory, Narrative theory, Community mothers

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## INTRODUCTION

### Brief overview of Toni Morrison's *"Sula"*

Toni Morrison's *"Sula,"* published in 1973, is a seminal work in African American literature that explores themes of community, identity, and the complexities of human relationships. *"Sula"* exemplifies Morrison's masterful use of magical realism, blending the ordinary with the extraordinary to offer unique insights into the African American experience (Dubey and Shalom, 2024). This narrative technique allows Morrison to explore the complexities of human existence, particularly the search for identity within the African American community. The novel's focus on female protagonists and their quest for selfhood is a recurring theme in Morrison's work, as she strives to retrieve and redefine African American women's lost identities (Abigail and Babu, 2020). Set in the small Ohio town of Medallion, the novel follows the lives of two African American women, *Sula* Peace and Nel Wright, from their childhood in the 1920s to their adulthood in the 1960s. Throughout the narrative, Morrison delves into the intricacies of their friendship, the dynamics of the tight-knit Black community in Medallion, and the broader social and historical contexts that shape the characters' experiences (Morrison, 1973).

### Statement of purpose and research question

This study aims to examine the role of elders in *"Sula"* and how they influence and shape community narratives through intergenerational dialogues. The research question guiding this investigation is: How do elders in *"Sula"* influence and shape community narratives through intergenerational dialogues? By addressing this question, the study seeks to illuminate the ways in which older characters in the novel contribute to the construction, preservation, and transmission of the community's collective memory and identity.

### Significance of the study

Exploring the role of elders in *"Sula"* is significant for many reasons. First, it enlightens the often-overlooked contributions of older adults in African American literature and culture. Second, it enhances our understanding of the narrative strategies employed by Toni Morrison, highlighting the importance of intergenerational dialogues in her

storytelling. Finally, this study offers insights into the broader social and cultural functions of community narratives, particularly their role in fostering resilience and cultural continuity in the face of adversity.

### Brief overview of theoretical framework

To analyze the role of elders in shaping community narratives in *"Sula,"* this study draws on several theoretical frameworks:

1. Narrative theory: This approach justifies the importance of stories and storytelling in the construction of individual and collective identities. As Herman (2009) argues, narratives serve as powerful tools for making sense of the world and negotiating social relationships.
2. African American studies: This interdisciplinary field examines the experiences, histories, and cultural expressions of African Americans. Scholars, such as Gates (1988) and Collins (2000) have highlighted the centrality of storytelling and oral traditions in African American culture, emphasizing their role in preserving cultural knowledge and fostering community bonds.
3. Gerontology: The study of aging and older adults provides valuable insights into the social and cultural roles of elders. In particular, research on successful aging and the contributions of older adults to their communities underscores the importance of intergenerational relationships and the transmission of wisdom (Rowe and Kahn, 1997).

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the role of elders in shaping community narratives in *"Sula,"* while also contributing to the broader understanding of intergenerational dialogues in African American literature and culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Previous studies on *"Sula"* focusing on themes, such as community, memory, and storytelling

*"Sula"* has been the subject of extensive scholarly analysis, with many critics focusing on the novel's exploration of community, memory, and storytelling. For instance, McKee (1996) examines the role of communal

spaces, such as porches and kitchens, in facilitating storytelling and the transmission of cultural knowledge. She argues that these spaces serve as sites of resistance and empowerment for the African American community in *Medallion*. Similarly, Seward and Tally (2014) explores the connection between memory and place in *"Sula,"* highlighting how the novel's characters engage with the past through their interactions with the physical environment.

Other scholars have focused on the role of storytelling and oral traditions in *"Sula."* Gooch (2021) analyzes the novel's use of African American folklore and its impact on the narrative structure. She contends that Morrison employs folkloric elements to create a distinctively Black feminist esthetic. Meanwhile, Henton (2012) examines the function of gossip and rumor in the novel, arguing that these forms of storytelling serve as tools for community building and the negotiation of social norms.

### **Scholarship on the role of elders in African American literature and culture**

The role of elders in African American literature and culture has been addressed by several scholars, who emphasize the importance of older adults in preserving cultural heritage and providing guidance to younger generations. For example, Gates (1988) discusses the trope of the "ancient mariner" or wise elder in African American literature, highlighting how these figures serve as repositories of cultural knowledge and wisdom. Similarly, Collins (2000) explores the concept of "othermothers" and "community mothers" in African American communities, emphasizing the role of older women in nurturing and supporting younger individuals.

In the context of African American history and culture, elders have played a crucial role in the transmission of oral histories and the preservation of cultural traditions. Scholars, such as Turner (1990) and Chatters *et al.* (2008) have examined the significance of intergenerational relationships and the exchange of cultural knowledge between older and younger African Americans. Their work underscores the importance of elders in maintaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of collective identity.

### **Gaps in the existing literature that this study addresses**

While previous studies have explored themes of community, memory, and storytelling in *"Sula,"* there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific role of elders in shaping community narratives through intergenerational dialogues. Existing scholarship has touched upon the significance of older characters, such as Eva Peace and the Deweys, but has not provided an in-depth analysis of their role in influencing and shaping the community's collective memory and identity.

Moreover, although scholars have examined the role of elders in African American literature and culture more broadly, there is a need for more focused studies that analyze the dynamics of intergenerational dialogues and their impact on community narratives within specific literary texts. By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute new insights to the existing scholarship on *"Sula"* and the role of elders in African American literature and culture.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Narrative theory and the construction of community identities**

The framework of narrative theory offers valuable insights into how storytelling shapes community identities. Herman (2009) notes that narratives are crucial for interpreting the world and managing social interactions. These stories allow both individuals and groups to structure their experiences, express their beliefs, and develop a collective sense of self.

In analyzing *"Sula,"* narrative theory sheds light on how the characters' tales contribute to the development and preservation of Medallion's African American community. Somers (1994) contends that people form their identities by situating themselves within a common

narrative structure, which provides a sense of continuity and purpose. The characters in *"Sula"* strengthen their collective identity and foster a sense of unity and belonging through the sharing of stories.

Moreover, narrative theory emphasizes the dynamic and dialogic nature of storytelling. Bakhtin (1981) highlights the intertextual and polyvocal aspects of narratives, demonstrating how they incorporate and respond to multiple voices and perspectives. In *"Sula,"* the community's narrative is shaped by the interplay of various characters' stories, reflecting the complex and often contested nature of collective identity.

### **The concept of "community mothers" and elder wisdom in African American culture**

The concept of "community mothers" or "othermothers" is central to understanding the role of elders in African American culture. Collins (2000) defines "othermothers" as women who assume responsibility for nurturing and supporting children who are not their own, often in response to the challenges posed by racial and economic oppression. These figures serve as sources of wisdom, guidance, and emotional support, contributing to the well-being and resilience of their communities.

In African American literature, the trope of the wise elder or "ancient mariner" is a recurring motif that embodies the cultural significance of elder wisdom. Gates (1988) argues that these figures serve as repositories of cultural knowledge, preserving and transmitting the community's history, values, and traditions. Through their stories and teachings, elders help to educate younger generations and instill in them a sense of pride and connection to their cultural heritage.

In *"Sula,"* characters, such as Eva Peace and the Deweys embody the concept of "community mothers" and elder wisdom. Their insights, experiences, and stories contribute to the community's collective memory and identity, shaping the narrative of Medallion and its residents.

### **Intergenerational dialogues as sites of cultural transmission and negotiation**

Intergenerational dialogues serve as crucial sites for the transmission and negotiation of cultural knowledge and values. Generations share a common historical and cultural location, which shapes their worldviews and experiences. Through interactions between generations, individuals exchange ideas, challenge assumptions, and negotiate the meaning of their shared history and identity.

In African American culture, intergenerational dialogues play a vital role in preserving cultural traditions and fostering a sense of continuity. Turner (1990) emphasizes the importance of oral history and the exchange of stories between generations in maintaining cultural heritage. Through these dialogues, younger individuals learn about their past, develop a sense of belonging, and gain the tools necessary to navigate their present and future.

In *"Sula,"* intergenerational dialogues occur between characters of different ages, such as *Sula* and Eva, or Nel and the Deweys. These conversations serve as opportunities for cultural transmission, as elders share their wisdom and experiences with younger characters. Moreover, these dialogues are sites of negotiation, as different generations engage with and challenge one another's perspectives, contributing to the dynamic and evolving nature of the community's narrative.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Textual analysis of "Sula" focusing on key scenes and conversations involving elders**

To examine the role of elders in shaping community narratives in *"Sula,"* this study employs a textual analysis approach, focusing on key scenes and conversations involving older characters. The following steps outline the method for identifying and analyzing these passages:

1. Identification of elder characters: The first step is to identify the elder characters in the novel, such as Eva Peace, the Deweys, and other older members of the Medallion community.
2. Selection of key scenes and conversations: The next step is to locate scenes and conversations in the text where these elder characters interact with younger characters or engage in storytelling. These passages are the primary units of analysis for this study.
3. Close reading: Each selected passage is subjected to a close reading, with attention paid to the content of the conversations, the dynamics between the characters, and the context in which the interactions occur.
4. Thematic coding: To identify patterns and themes in the text, relevant passages are coded according to emerging categories, such as the transmission of cultural knowledge, negotiation of identity, or challenges to authority.

#### Close reading of symbolism, imagery, and language use related to intergenerational dialogues

In addition to analyzing the content of key scenes and conversations, this study employs a close reading of the symbolism, imagery, and language use related to intergenerational dialogues. This approach helps to uncover the deeper meanings and significances embedded in the text.

1. Symbolism: Examine the use of symbols in the text that relate to intergenerational dialogues, such as objects, settings, or characters that represent the exchange of knowledge or the negotiation of identity. For example, the significance of the Peace family home or the role of nature in framing conversations.
2. Imagery: Analyze the imagery employed in the descriptions of intergenerational dialogues, focusing on how sensory details and metaphors contribute to the overall atmosphere and meaning of these scenes.
3. Language use: Investigate the language choices and rhetorical strategies used by elder characters in their conversations with younger characters. This includes analyzing the use of dialect, idioms, or specific rhetorical devices that convey authority, wisdom, or emotional resonance.

#### Analysis of the narrative structure and its impact on community storytelling

To understand how the narrative structure of *"Sula"* influences community storytelling, this study examines the formal elements of the novel and their impact on the transmission and negotiation of community narratives.

1. Narrative perspective: Analyze the novel's use of narrative perspective, focusing on how the third-person limited narration shapes the reader's understanding of the community and its stories. Consider the shifts in perspective and their implications for the construction of collective identity.
2. Temporal structure: Investigate the novel's temporal structure, including the use of flashbacks, foreshadowing, and non-linear storytelling. Examine how these techniques influence the presentation of community history and the negotiation of memory.
3. Intertextuality: Explore the novel's use of intertextual references, such as allusions to folktales, biblical stories, or historical events. Consider how these references enrich the community's narrative and situate it within a broader cultural and historical context.
4. Narrative gaps and silences: Analyze the narrative gaps and silences in the text, focusing on what is left unsaid or implied in the community's story. Examine how these absences shape the reader's interpretation of the community's narrative and the dynamics of intergenerational dialogues.

By combining textual analysis, close reading, and an examination of the narrative structure, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the role of elders in shaping community narratives in *"Sula"* through intergenerational dialogues. This multifaceted approach enables a deeper appreciation of the novel's

exploration of community identity, cultural transmission, and the power of storytelling.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### Eva Peace and the power of storytelling

###### *Eva's role as a community matriarch and griot*

Eva Peace, the matriarch of the Peace family, embodies the archetype of the wise elder and griot in African American culture. As a griot, Eva serves as a storyteller and historian, preserving and transmitting the community's memories, values, and traditions. Her stories not only entertain but also educate and impart wisdom, making her a central figure in the construction of the community's narrative. Eva's unique perspective, shaped by her experiences of hardship and resilience, endows her with an authority that commands respect and attention from her listeners.

###### *Her influence on Sula and the community's narrative*

Eva's influence on her granddaughter *Sula* is profound and multifaceted. Through her stories, Eva imparts to *Sula* a sense of their family's history and the broader context of the African American experience. For instance, Eva's account of her own mother's enslavement and her subsequent journey to freedom resonates with *Sula*, shaping her understanding of her own identity and place in the world (Morrison, 1973, p. 38). Eva's storytelling also instills in *Sula* a sense of independence and defiance, qualities that *Sula* embodies throughout her life.

Moreover, Eva's narratives shape the community's collective memory and identity. Her stories often serve as cautionary tales, reminding the community of the dangers of conformity and the importance of individuality. Eva's unconventional wisdom challenges the community's norms and expectations, encouraging a more nuanced and complex understanding of their shared history. For example, her decision to set her son Plum on fire, though shocking, is framed within a narrative of maternal love and the desire to free him from the horrors of war (Morrison, 1973, p. 47). This act, though extreme, underscores Eva's commitment to preserving the dignity and humanity of her family and community.

##### The Deweys and collective memory

###### *The Deweys as keepers of the community's history*

The Deweys, a trio of older men who frequent the Time and a Half Pool Hall, serve as the community's collective memory. Their role is to observe, comment on, and preserve the community's history through their conversations and storytelling. The Deweys' narratives are characterized by a blend of humor, insight, and a deep understanding of the community's dynamics. Their stories often provide a counterpoint to the official or dominant narratives, offering a more inclusive and nuanced perspective on the community's past.

###### *Their interactions with younger characters and the transmission of cultural knowledge*

The Deweys' interactions with younger characters, such as Nel and *Sula*, are crucial for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Through their stories, the Deweys impart wisdom and historical context, helping younger generations to understand the complexities of their community and its history. For instance, their accounts of the community's past, including the story of Shadrack and National Suicide Day, provide a rich tapestry of memories that inform the younger characters' understanding of their own identities (Morrison, 1973, p. 14).

The Deweys' storytelling also serves as a form of social commentary, critiquing the community's norms and values. Their narratives often highlight the absurdities and injustices of the community's social hierarchy, challenging younger characters to question and reevaluate their own beliefs and actions. In this way, the Deweys' stories not only preserve the community's history but also contribute to its ongoing evolution and transformation.



### Intergenerational tensions and narrative negotiation

#### *Conflicts and disagreements between generations*

Intergenerational tensions in *"Sula"* are evident in the conflicts and disagreements between elder and younger characters. These tensions often arise from differing perspectives on the community's history, values, and norms. For example, *Sula's* unconventional lifestyle and defiance of social expectations create friction with the community's elders, who view her behavior as a threat to their established order. This conflict is exemplified in *Sula's* relationship with her grandmother Eva, who both admires and fears *Sula's* independence.

#### *How these tensions shape and reshape community narratives*

The tensions between generations serve as sites of narrative negotiation, where the community's story is contested, reshaped, and reaffirmed. Through their interactions, elder and younger characters engage in a dialogue that challenges and enriches the community's collective memory. For instance, *Sula's* defiance of social norms forces the community to confront its hypocrisies and biases, leading to a more nuanced understanding of its shared history.

Moreover, these intergenerational tensions highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of the community's narrative. As different generations engage with and challenge one another's perspectives, the community's story becomes a living, breathing entity, capable of adapting and changing in response to new insights and experiences. This process of narrative negotiation is essential for the community's continued growth and resilience.

### The significance of shared spaces and rituals

#### *The role of communal spaces (e.g., porches, kitchens) in facilitating intergenerational dialogues*

Communal spaces, such as porches and kitchens, play a crucial role in facilitating intergenerational dialogues in *"Sula."* These spaces serve as sites of informal gathering and storytelling, where elder and younger characters can engage in meaningful conversations. For example, the porch of the Peace family home is a recurring setting for intergenerational dialogues, providing a space where Eva can share her stories and wisdom with *Sula* and other members of the community. The significance of these communal spaces lies in their ability to foster a sense of intimacy and connection between generations. They provide a neutral ground where elder and younger characters can come together, share their experiences, and negotiate the meaning of their shared history. In this way, communal spaces serve as vital nodes in the community's narrative network, facilitating the transmission and negotiation of cultural knowledge.

#### *The importance of shared rituals and customs in preserving community narratives*

Shared rituals and customs are essential for preserving and transmitting the community's narrative in *"Sula."* These practices serve as markers of collective identity, reinforcing the community's sense of cohesion and continuity. For instance, the annual National Suicide Day, initiated by Shadrack, becomes a shared ritual that binds the community together, providing a collective outlet for their grief and despair (Morrison, 1973, p.15). Moreover, shared rituals and customs provide a framework for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Through their participation in these practices, younger characters learn about the community's history, values, and traditions. These rituals serve as living embodiments of the community's narrative, ensuring that its stories and memories are passed down from one generation to the next.

### CONCLUSION

#### **The main findings and their implications for understanding *"Sula"***

This study has examined the role of elders in shaping community narratives in Toni Morrison's *"Sula"* through intergenerational dialogues. The main findings can be summarized as follows:

1. Eva Peace and the power of storytelling: Eva Peace, as a community matriarch and griot, wields significant influence over the

community's narrative. Her stories impart wisdom, challenge norms, and shape the identities of younger characters, particularly her granddaughter *Sula*. Eva's storytelling underscores the power of narrative in preserving cultural heritage and fostering individual growth.

2. The Deweys and collective memory: The Deweys serve as keepers of the community's history, using their stories to provide context, critique, and continuity. Their interactions with younger characters facilitate the transmission of cultural knowledge, ensuring that the community's past informs its present and future.
3. Intergenerational tensions and narrative negotiation: Conflicts between generations in *"Sula"* highlight the dynamic nature of the community's narrative. These tensions serve as sites of negotiation, where the community's story is contested, reshaped, and enriched through dialogue and debate.
4. The significance of shared spaces and rituals: Communal spaces and shared rituals play a vital role in facilitating intergenerational dialogues and preserving community narratives. These settings and practices foster connection, intimacy, and the transmission of cultural knowledge.

These findings deepen our understanding of *"Sula"* by illuminating the complex interplay between storytelling, memory, and identity. They demonstrate how Morrison's novel explores the power of narrative to shape individual and collective experiences, and how intergenerational dialogues contribute to the construction and evolution of community identity.

### The broader significance of this study for African American literature and cultural studies

The broader significance of this study lies in its contribution to several interrelated fields:

1. African American literature: This study enriches our understanding of African American literary traditions by highlighting the role of elders and intergenerational dialogues in shaping community narratives. It adds to the existing scholarship on Toni Morrison's work and African American storytelling practices.
2. Cultural studies: By examining the dynamics of cultural transmission and negotiation, this study offers insights into the broader social and cultural functions of storytelling. It underscores the importance of narrative in fostering resilience, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting collective identity.
3. Age studies and gerontology: This study contributes to the growing body of work on aging and the role of elders in society. It highlights the significance of intergenerational relationships and the wisdom and experiences that older adults bring to their communities.

### Suggestions for future research on intergenerational dialogues and community narratives

Future research on intergenerational dialogues and community narratives could explore several avenues:

1. Comparative studies: Comparative analyses of other African American texts or cultural productions could shed light on the similarities and differences in the role of elders and intergenerational dialogues across different contexts and historical periods.
2. Interdisciplinary approaches: Incorporating perspectives from fields such as anthropology, sociology, or psychology could enrich our understanding of the dynamics of cultural transmission and the functions of storytelling in different communities.
3. Oral history and ethnographic studies: Conducting oral history interviews or ethnographic research with real-world communities could provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of intergenerational dialogues and the construction of community narratives.
4. Intersectional analyses: Exploring the intersections of race, gender, class, and other identity markers could offer a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics at play in intergenerational dialogues and the shaping of community narratives.

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