

## WHS Book Rationale

**Title:** *Sula*

**Author:** Toni Morrison

- **Intended Audience**

A.P. English Literature and Composition students—this is a college level course.

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

The novel focuses on the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio, and the neighborhood called “The Bottom”. It covers the years from 1919 to 1965 and is centered on the African-American community, and primarily follows the characters of Sula and her best friend Nel from their childhood through adulthood, to Sula’s death and beyond. Their friendship is forged in the tragedy of an accidental death, survives Sula’s ten-year disappearance, but is irreparably damaged when Sula sleeps with Nel’s husband. Through the examination of the relationships within the novel, Toni Morrison invites readers to examine their own beliefs about community, family, and friendship. This is one of the most highly critically acclaimed novels by the Nobel Prize winning author. It provides a strong counterpoint to other A.P. English reading that is, on the surface, more structurally daring (e.g., *Waterland* and *Ceremony*), but pushes students to see that the most complex literature often comes in a package that is deceptively simple.

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

Toni Morrison’s precision with language and deliberate building of a novel structure allows students to apply the accumulated knowledge and skill of their A.P. English experience as they analyze a work that seems fairly simple because the language and the story are drawn from the everyday. This novel is used as the final whole class reading before the A.P. exam, and it provides material for applying skills of literary analysis and the identification and evaluation of various literary techniques. All the basic elements of fiction—setting, plot, character, structure, theme—are easy to identify in this text, but it is challenging for students to see the complexity of Morrison’s work without focused attention and critical thinking. Thus, it becomes a strong finale for the course.

- **Potential problems**

There are scenes of tragic accidental deaths as well as a scene in which a mother burns her adult son to death. Several of the characters are sexually promiscuous and some of their sexual encounters are described in detailed and vivid language. There is racial prejudice throughout the book (including whites prejudiced toward blacks, blacks prejudiced towards whites, and blacks who discriminate within their own race).

- **Addressing potential problems**

This novel, as is typical for Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison’s work, has been challenged in some school districts; reading and discussing articles about the challenges to this book allows

students to examine, define, express, and defend their own views of what is appropriate reading. Through these discussions, most students come to believe that there is no blanket definition of what is “appropriate.” Class discussion of the novel, especially students’ attitudes toward the characters’ choices, enables students to see that not everyone sees the world in the same way, and careful examination of the same facts by different people does not lead to identical conclusions. This type of discussion is a perfect segue for the final preparation for the A.P. exam, which does not require identical readings of texts, but expects strong evidence for varying points of view.