



READING TONI MORRISON

RACHEL LISTER



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Rachel Lister

The Pop Lit Book Club

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PREFACE

Reading Toni Morrison is an informative and accessible guide to Toni Morrison's novels, ranging from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *Love* (2003). The guide offers analysis of Morrison's formal and narrative poetics and explores her engagement with contemporary issues and popular culture. It aims to introduce Morrison's work to new readers and to open up lines of inquiry to those already familiar with her novels. Discussion questions are provided both to focus and develop readings.

The opening chapter of the guide gives an outline of Morrison's life and career. Drawing from a range of interviews and her novels, this chapter provides insight into the ways in which Morrison's heritage and personal experiences have informed her work. It also examines Morrison's revelations concerning the conception of her novels, her writing methodology, and her thoughts on the role of the contemporary writer.

"Toni Morrison and the Novel" examines Morrison's vision of the novel form and her engagement with the aesthetics and narrative conventions of black oral and musical traditions. This chapter considers the relationship between Morrison's formal strategies and thematic concerns. It addresses the issue of genre, looking at the various ways in which critics have categorized her fiction and examining her response to these classifications. Individual readings of Morrison's novels follow this chapter. They place the novels in context and provide analysis of thematic concerns, characterization, language, and imagery. Particular emphasis is placed on Morrison's handling of themes that extend across her fiction: the different forms and manifestations of love, the pull of the past, and the relationship between self and community.

"Today's Issues in Toni Morrison's Work" examines the contemporary relevance of Morrison's fiction. The chapter draws from Morrison's

commentary on race, class, and gender in today's America and goes on to analyze her handling of these issues in her fiction. It addresses Morrison's concerns about the impact of consumerist ideology and its attendant notions of success and analyzes her elaboration of alternative narratives and models for the contemporary reader.

The chapter "Pop Culture in Toni Morrison's Work" explores Morrison's engagement with popular culture. It delivers analysis of her representation of popular culture and its various discourses in her fictional world and ends with a discussion of Jonathan Demme's film *Beloved*, to date the only cinematic adaptation of Morrison's work. This section also considers the reception of the film and Morrison's thoughts on the adaptation process. "Toni Morrison on the Internet" offers guidance to the wealth of online resources available to Morrison's readers. It provides an overview of online interviews, articles, and reviews, as well as some critical material on Morrison's novels.

Morrison's relationship with the media is the focus of "Toni Morrison and the Media." It explores how Morrison has used the media to reach a wider audience and to engage in public debates. Morrison's scrutiny of the media's language is also addressed here; the chapter considers her analysis of the media's role in manipulating public opinion and perpetuating racial and social stereotypes. This chapter also examines Morrison's response to the critical reception of her work.

The final chapter is a guide to readers seeking fiction that shares thematic concerns with Morrison's oeuvre or that encourages a similar level of reader involvement. This chapter draws on Morrison's commentaries on books that she has enjoyed or that have influenced her in some way, and considers works by writers who have identified Morrison as an influence or expressed an interest in her concerns.

I thank my editors at Greenwood, Kaitlin Ciarmiello and George Butler, for their considerable patience, guidance, and encouragement. My appreciation also goes to Anne Talvacchio for her patience and hard work during the production of this book. Many thanks also go to Pamela Knights for her years of support and Diana Collecott for introducing me to Toni Morrison. As always I am deeply grateful to Mum, Dad, and Brian for their unfailing support.



TONI MORRISON: A WRITER'S LIFE

In January 1998, shortly after the publication of her seventh novel *Paradise*, Toni Morrison gave a television interview to journalist Charlie Rose. After asking her about her latest novel, Rose turned to the subject of Morrison's life. Her response was to enact dozing off. In 2003, after the publication of her next novel, *Love*, Rose raised the subject again, suggesting that Morrison write her life story. She expressed surprise at such a notion, telling Rose that her daily life is not appropriate material for an autobiography; it is her "imagination" that is compelling.¹ From Morrison's perspective, the writer should be measured by her "ability ... to imagine what is *not* the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar."² As early as 1976, Morrison noted a movement away from autobiographical renderings in her fiction. Speaking to Robert Stepto, she observed that the representation of community in her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, differs from that of her first, *The Bluest Eye*, where she was drawing on autobiographical material.³

Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in 1931. She became known as Toni during her undergraduate years at Howard University. She has explained that she felt much vexation upon seeing the name "Toni Morrison" rather than her real name on the cover of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. She originally submitted the manuscript under the name Toni Morrison because it was familiar to her editor.⁴

Morrison was born and raised in Lorain, Ohio, a town populated by immigrants mainly from Europe. At her integrated school she met

Many accounts of Morrison's life give her name as Chloe Anthony Wofford. However, John Duvall reports that the middle name "Ardelia" appears on Morrison's birth certificate (Duvall, 330).

children from a range of cultural backgrounds, some of whom she taught to read. She recalls that Lorain offered little in the way of spectacular scenery or architecture but has speculated that this might have proved "conducive to a fecund imagination."⁵ It is the language of the African American community of Lorain that she remembers most vividly and that would come to infuse her fiction: a powerful discourse emerged from the combination of "new language and biblical language and sermon language and standard language" heard in her hometown.⁶

Morrison, the second of four children, speaks of her childhood as an enriching and stimulating time. When she is asked to speak about her early years, salient images and feelings resurface persistently; the sounds of her childhood had particular resonance. She recalls listening to music—both of Morrison's maternal grandparents were musicians—being uplifted by the sound of her mother's singing, and following the exchange of stories between family members and friends.

Memories of her father's ghost stories are particularly vivid. Morrison's mother Ella Ramah Willis Wofford was a homemaker and her father George Wofford was a ship welder. Both had come to Ohio from the South searching for a better life and hoping to find a space beyond the gaze of a racist white society. From her parents Morrison learned lessons that have guided her throughout her life. Her response to racism was informed by her father, who reminded her that she did not inhabit the "imagination" of racist people. She has "always looked upon the acts of racist exclusion or insult, as pitiable, from the other person" and "always thought that there was something deficient—intellectually, emotionally—about such people."⁷

When asked to identify sources of inspiration for her imaginative world, Morrison points to the stories and experiences of her ancestors. Personal experience rarely finds a direct route into her novels but has ignited prolonged consideration of particular concepts or focalizations. Speaking to Anne Koenen about the conception of "self-invented" women in her fiction, such as *Sula's* Eva and *Song of Solomon's* Pilate, Morrison is reminded of an experience from her youth.⁸ She recalls being in a room with her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother and recognizing her own place as a descendant of this line of women.

The impact of this formidable apprehension resonated powerfully with Morrison; readers see its influence in the representation of Pilate's woman-centered family in *Song of Solomon*.⁹ Morrison called on her recently deceased father for other narratives and discourses in *Song of Solomon*, the first of her novels to place masculine experience at its center. In the foreword to the Vintage edition of the novel, she reveals that the narrative took shape only after she asked her father's ghost to describe the men he knew; his responses laid the foundations for the main narrative line.

A further episode that has greatly informed Morrison's fiction is recorded in her introduction to Robert Bergman's collection of photographs, *A Kind of Rapture*, in which she details a revealing encounter with an old fisherwoman. The woman told Morrison that she fished most days in the water on a neighbor's property. Sensing a strong connection with this woman, Morrison sought her out again but she never reappeared; the neighbor, whose permission the fisherwoman claimed she had been given, knew nothing of her. Speculating on her powerful desire to engage further with the fisherwoman, Morrison realizes that she was "missing some aspect of [her]self, and that there are no strangers."¹⁰ This epiphany sheds light on some of the more mysterious encounters in Morrison's fiction. In *Paradise*, Consolata and Dovey register a powerful sense of connection with apparently strange men who seem to reflect facets of themselves back to them.

Morrison's first encounters with literature came at an early age. Indeed, she has often stated that she cannot recall her pre-literate life. It would be some years, however, before she would encounter African American literature; it was not taught in the integrated school that she attended. During her teenage years, Morrison cleaned houses after school; she told Claudia Dreifus that she found some interest in using housekeeping "gadgets" that she had not used before. While some of the people she worked for were "nice," others were "terrible." She drew on this experience in *The Bluest Eye* in her portrayal of Pauline Breedlove, a mother who, forced to raise her children in squalor, is ignored by society unless she speaks or acts in her role as a maid for a white household.¹¹ Morrison graduated from high school in 1949 and moved to Washington, D.C., to attend Howard University. Here she met her future husband, architect Harold Morrison, and joined the Howard University Players. On her travels with the theater group, she visited the South for the first time. This experience, along with memories of her parents' accounts, would greatly inform her fictional representations of the South. After graduating from Howard in 1953, she went on to study English at postgraduate level at Cornell University. She earned her

master's degree in 1955, writing her thesis on "The Treatment of the Alienated Subject" in the literature of modernist writers William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Morrison taught English at Texas Southern University before returning to Howard to teach. In 1958, she married Harold Morrison. They had two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin, and divorced after six years.

From 1965 until 1983, Morrison worked for the publishing company Random House in New York, eventually becoming a senior editor. There she made it her main priority to find and publish writers whose narratives had yet to be heard or read. Morrison is now recognized for playing a significant role in revitalizing the market for black literature in the 1970s, both as a novelist and a publisher. In *Loose Canons*, a study of multiculturalism in the United States, Henry Louis Gates Jr. notes that there was some resistance among publishers to the work of African American writers during the 1970s. He credits this to growing unease with some of the political campaigns of the time and notes that Morrison countered this resistance, continuing to publish literature by black writers from all over the world.¹²

It was while working at Random House and raising her two children in Syracuse, New York, that Morrison began to write her first novel. While teaching at Howard University she had joined a writing group, for which she had produced a short story about a black girl who longed for blue eyes; this short narrative, which was favorably received by other members of the group, would provide the foundation for *The Bluest Eye*. From the beginning Morrison regarded the act of writing as "a very long, sustained reading process—except that [she] was the one producing the words."¹³ She worked on the novel while her children were asleep and found that in writing this story, she could gain entry into "an unsullied place of envisioning and imagining."¹⁴ Indeed, since writing *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has experienced very few periods when she has not felt the exhilarating pull of an idea for a new narrative. After being rejected many times, *The Bluest Eye* was published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1970. To date, the rest of Morrison's novels have been published by Alfred A. Knopf. In the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison recalls the tenor of the novel's first reviews: "With very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread."¹⁵ By 1974, *The Bluest Eye* was no longer in print. Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973), was subject to further misreading but generally fared better with the critics. The novel earned Morrison further recognition with a nomination for the National Book Award in 1975. *Sula* was an alternate Book-of-the-Month Club selection and won the Ohioana Book Award. Most significantly, it was

through writing this novel that Morrison felt that she had found her individual writing style: "That book seemed to suggest that I had hit on a voice that was mine, that I didn't write like anybody else."¹⁶

Critics and readers of Morrison's work remain fascinated by this early period of her career. In interviews she is often asked to explain how she found the time to write while raising two children alone. In response she refers to a crucial moment when she sensed the need to evaluate her life and reached the realization that she must respond to two callings: she must be a mother to her children and write. We hear echoes of this strategy in *Song of Solomon* when Pilate asks herself what she must do first to survive and then to live an authentic, meaningful life. With the publication of *Song of Solomon* in 1977, Morrison extended her readership widely. The novel was very well received and went on to win several prestigious literary prizes, including the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. *Song of Solomon* was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, the first by an African American writer since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. The novel's publication is now regarded as a milestone in African American culture, so much so that Henry Louis Gates Jr. refers to "the post-*Song of Solomon* ... era of black writing."¹⁷ Morrison has identified the publication of the novel and its subsequent success as a pivotal time not only in her career but in her personal trajectory: only after this novel's release did she claim the identity of writer. She had previously referred to herself first and foremost as a publisher who happened to write novels; she has since recognized this hesitation to claim the identity of writer as a particularly female trait.

Morrison's first three novels were published in the 1970s, the beginning of a particularly rich period for black women's writing. As well as Morrison's three novels, the decade brought the publication of Alice Walker's first novel (*The Third Life of Grange Copeland*), short-story collections by Toni Cade Bambara (*Gorilla My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*), and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the first in Maya Angelou's best-selling series of autobiographies. Commentators on African American literature have singled out Morrison as the first woman novelist to give such full expression to the experience of black girls and women. She has often contested this, pointing to novels by Zora Neale Hurston and Paule Marshall. When Morrison is asked to comment on the status of contemporary black women's writing, she stresses its diversity. In an interview for *The World: The Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*, she was asked if there are advantages to teaching the works of black women together; she replied that it "can't hurt" but

added that she is happy to be taught alongside writers from a range of time periods and cultural matrices: "I don't mind being taught with Alice Walker, William Shakespeare, Milton, Marguerite Duras, or anybody."¹⁸ Several times throughout her career she has noted that the publishing world and the media seem to have room for only one commercially successful black woman writer at a time. She has often expressed her frustration at the disappointing sales of work by black women that she has published such as the novels of Gayl Jones and the poetry of June Jordan.

In 1980, Morrison was elected to the National Council on the Arts. Her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, appeared one year later. To date, it is the only novel in Morrison's canon that takes place primarily outside of the United States. Its setting is a fictional Caribbean island called Isle des Chevaliers, where a white millionaire named Valerian has attempted to construct his own version of paradise. Morrison has explained that she wanted to put her characters in a "pressure cooker" which forced them to confront those issues that they have suppressed or denied.¹⁹ On the island, the characters are compelled to deal with the buried tensions which surface on the arrival of Son, a black man who challenges their conceptions of themselves and their identity politics. In 1981, Morrison was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and appeared on the front cover of the March 30 edition of *Newsweek*. When told she was to achieve this "coup of the cover," she responded: "The day you put a middle-aged, gray-haired colored lady on the [cover of the] magazine, I will know the revolution is over."²⁰ She was the first black woman to feature on the cover of the magazine since writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston in 1943.

Another significant turning point for Morrison occurred in 1983. She left her job as editor at Random House after people had voiced concerns that her work as a writer might compromise her editorial duties. Morrison has often spoken of this time as one of exhilarating freedom as she engaged with narratives that were waiting to be told. While collecting material for *The Black Book* (1974), a compilation of visual and textual documents chronicling African American history, Morrison had encountered various stories that would form the foundation for a thematically linked trilogy of novels. At the center of each narrative was a different incarnation of love: one took the form of a newspaper report on a woman named Margaret Garner who had killed her child and tried to kill herself and her other children in order to prevent their return to slavery; another narrative emerged from various newspaper clippings reporting the migration of blacks to Oklahoma, having been told by towns of ex-slaves to "Come Prepared or Not at All"; and a third narrative was

captured in a photograph by James Van der Zee of a dying young woman who had been shot by her boyfriend but refused to reveal the name of her killer.

The encounter with Margaret Garner's story inspired the conception of Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987). In the foreword to the Vintage edition of the novel, Morrison writes of her realization of the magnitude of her task: to enter and to invite readers into "the repellant landscape" of slavery "was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts."²¹ Morrison found the historical figure of Margaret Garner deeply compelling but she sought a further source of inspiration for her fictional representation. As she sat in front of her home on the Hudson River, a young woman emerged from the water. Here was the "figure most central to the story ... the murdered, not the murderer, the one who lost everything and had no say in any of it."²² A conversation with writer Gloria Naylor in 1985 reveals that Morrison initially intended to explore the stories of Margaret Garner and the dying woman in Van der Zee's photograph within the boundaries of one novel.²³ However, upon receiving the first part of the manuscript, the publisher decided that it should stand alone as an autonomous work. *Beloved* would become Morrison's most famous, celebrated, and studied novel. On its publication, it received almost universal praise and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the Robert F. Kennedy Award, and the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award. In 2006, the *New York Times Book Review* named *Beloved* the best American novel of the past twenty-five years. Morrison herself does not consider *Beloved* to be her best work, but has explained why she believes that it has maintained this reputation. She told Charlie Rose in 2003 that readers feel the significance of engaging with its subject matter: the novel is about "'it,' slavery," a subject that "is so big and full of sensation."²⁴

Works of social and literary criticism followed *Beloved*. In 1992, Morrison edited and introduced a collection of essays on the Clarence Thomas hearings, entitled *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*. Her seminal work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), explores how "the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature." Through her readings she reveals how the concerns of canonized works of fiction are "activated by a complex of awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism."²⁵ *Playing in the Dark* opens up new avenues of inquiry into much-analyzed works of literature such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Reviews

of *Playing in the Dark* were quick to acknowledge its originality and to predict, correctly, its significant influence on the practice of literary criticism. Morrison has revealed that she experienced some animosity from academics who questioned her credentials for this kind of writing. Again, she encountered resistance to the possibility of transcending the boundaries of professional fields.

In 1992, the second novel in Morrison's "love" trilogy was published. Set in Harlem in the 1920s, *Jazz* explores the lives of married couple Joe and Violet Trace, who joined the Great Migration to the city from Virginia. Interwoven with their experiences of urban life are the buried stories of their ancestors from the antebellum South. Morrison accessed both eras through research and by engaging the memories of her parents, whose discussions evoked the 1920s and whose stories evoked the South.²⁶ Reflecting on the kind of discourse required for this novel, Morrison summons a vivid memory of a visual image from her own childhood: she remembers peeking into a trunk and gaining a tantalizing glimpse of her mother's life in the form of an evening purse decorated with jewels. The purse served as a visual analogue to her writing style: in *Jazz*, Morrison would create a language that would match its magnetism. *Jazz* was the first novel that Morrison wrote without the advice of her editor, Robert Gottlieb. She told Charlie Rose that she wanted to experience the writing process without the presence of Gottlieb's gaze. She would also write *Paradise* without any dialogue with Gottlieb, but would be reunited with him for her eighth novel, *Love*.²⁷

In 1993, Morrison received the ultimate honor for a writer of literature when she won the Nobel Prize. She was the first African American writer to receive the accolade. Morrison has reflected openly on the political significance of the award: "It was as if the whole category of 'female writer' and 'black writer' had been redeemed. I felt I represented a whole world of women who either were silenced or who had never received the imprimatur of the established literary world."²⁸ She has since confirmed that the Nobel Prize has impacted on her writing life only in practical terms: she has noted a shift in attitudes toward her work, but the award has not changed the way she writes. Shortly after receiving the Nobel Prize, Morrison's house burned down. She has expressed her enduring sense of devastation at the loss of personal items such as photographs of her children, manuscripts of her work, and the view of the Hudson River that furnished the entrance of *Beloved* into her life.²⁹

Morrison received the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in 1996. One year later