

**Record: 1**

Toni MorrisonDawes, Kwame. Dictionary of World Biography: The 20th Century, January 2000, p1-3. (Author Biography) Author Name: Morrison, Toni

**Database:** Literary Reference Center

**Toni Morrison****Toni Morrison**

**Given Name:** Chloe Anthony Wofford

**Also known as:** Chloe Anthony Morrison

**Born:** February 18, 1931; Lorain, Ohio

**Quick Reference**

**Area of Achievement:** Literature

**Contribution:** Morrison was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her work includes some of the most engaging contributions to American literature in the last hundred years.



*Toni Morrison (Maria Mulas)*

**Principal Works - Toni Morrison****children's literature**

The Big Box, 1999 (with Slade Morrison)

The Book of Mean People, 2002 (with Slade Morrison)

Poppy or the Snake?, 2003 (with Slade Morrison)

The Ant or the Grasshopper?, 2003 (with Slade Morrison)

The Lion or the Mouse?, 2003 (with Slade Morrison)

**drama**

Dreaming Emmett, pr. 1986

**edited text(s)**

To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton, 1972

The Black Book: Three Hundred Years of African American Life, 1974

Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality, 1992

Deep Sightings and Rescue Missions: Fiction, Essays, and Conversations, 1996 (of Toni Cade Bambara)

Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case, 1997

**long fiction**

The Bluest Eye, 1970

Sula, 1973

Song of Solomon, 1977

Tar Baby, 1981

Beloved, 1987

Jazz, 1992

Paradise, 1998

Love, 2003

A Mercy, 2008

**nonfiction**

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, 1992

Conversations with Toni Morrison, 1994 (Danille Taylor-Guthrie, editor)

Remember: The Journey to School Integration, 2004

What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction, 2008 (Carolyn C. Denard, editor)

**opera**

Margaret Garner, pr. 2005 (libretto; music by Richard Danielpour; based on her novel Beloved)

**song cycle**

Honey and Rue, pr. 1992 (lyrics; music by André Previn)

**Early Life**

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, on February 18, 1931. She was the second of four children born to George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. Her father's occupations included car washing, steel mill welding, road construction, and shipyard work, which typified the eclectic labor lifestyle of African American men living during the Great Depression of the late 1920's and 1930's. Her mother worked at home and sang in church. Both parents had strong Southern roots. Morrison's father was from Georgia and had vivid memories of racial violence in his childhood, while her mother's parents were part of the migration of African Americans from Alabama, via Kentucky, who sought to find a better life in the North.

Morrison's parents taught her much about understanding racism and growing up in predominantly white America. Her father was not very optimistic about the capacity of whites to transcend their bigotry toward blacks and remained acutely untrusting of all white people. Her mother's judgment about whites was less pessimistic, although she adhered to the thinking that strength and hope in the black community had to be secured from within that community and not from without. These community values — values of the village — have become the cornerstone of Morrison's literary and political thinking. Her focus is consistently directed

within the black community, a focus that reflects her confidence in the tangible culture of black America and its crucial role in shaping strong and talented people.

In her childhood, Morrison's eclectic literary tastes introduced her to such literary works as Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and the works of Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevski, and Jane Austen. Morrison was quite aware of the disparity that existed between the largely white worlds of these works and her own black female experience. Her reading enabled her to understand the value of cultural specificity in literature and the universality of the particular. It also demonstrated that her own culture, values, dreams, and feelings were not being represented in the literature she was reading. In many ways, her movement toward writing fiction was spurred by a need to redress what she felt was a woeful silence about black experience in the literature she read.

After completing high school in Lorain, Morrison went on to receive her B.A. from Howard University. She became involved with theater and had the opportunity to travel through the South performing before black audiences. Those trips gave her a better understanding of the geographical reality of the black American experience, a grounding that would be reproduced in her fiction. In 1953, she went on to Cornell University, where she completed her master's degree, studying suicide in the work of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. These writers were fitting figures against which she could react as a writer. Faulkner, because of his white vision of the Southern experience, and Woolf, because of her white treatment of the female experience in a male-dominated world, provided Morrison with models upon which she would later improvise.

Morrison taught at Texas Southern University for two years and then taught at Howard. There she honed her political views on black America, arguing against the current desegregation rhetoric by suggesting that blacks needed greater economic independence and needed to be wary of distorting their own culture and values through assimilation.

At Howard she married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect with whom she had two sons. The marriage was not a positive experience for Morrison; it left her feeling powerless and unsatisfied. She left Howard in 1964, divorced her husband, and assumed a post at Random House in New York City as an editor. Morrison continued her teaching career despite her intense work with Random House as a senior editor for so many years. She has taught at Yale University, Bard College, the State University of New York campuses at Purchase and Albany, and Princeton University.

### **Life's Work**

In 1993, Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in recognition of her achievements as a novelist of outstanding talent. The award represented the culmination of a series of accolades that have followed Morrison after the publication of each of her six novels. These novels have become classics in American literature and have been the subject of extensive critical study. Morrison has also published remarkably intelligent discussions of her works in numerous interviews and essays. She forces literary critics to reevaluate their innate suspicion of writers who write and speak about their own works. The combination of the novels and Morrison's engaging commentaries produces an insight into the deeply committed psyche and spirit of this woman. Her reviews and critical articles published in *The New York Times* and its *Review of Books* (to which she has been a regular contributor for years) constitute a significant body of critical approaches to literature and culture. Her commitment is to her African American experience, and her goal has been to evolve a literary aesthetic that is intrinsically African and American.

Morrison wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, during her painful marriage. The instinct to write was shaped by a need to read something with which she could identify. In this regard, Morrison identifies with the discourse of the postcolonial writer who seeks to evolve a voice that will articulate her experience in a way that allows it to overwhelm the domination of the culture of the colonizer. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison deftly treats the issues of

identity and race with language and poetics that echo the writing of Frantz Fanon. At the core of the novel is the psychological trauma of Pecola, a black girl's experience of her racial identity in a predominantly white society. Her desire to have blue eyes represents the painful refutation of her own sense of self-worth as a black child. The novel is posited as a parable — a tale that painfully explores issues of incest, maturation, friendship, racism, and sexual violence through poetic language that is at once simple and startlingly complex. Morrison's achievement with this first novel was to contribute a series of vivid images and literary insights (complete with their paradoxes and complexities) to the raging debate around the Black Power movement of the late 1960's. Morrison provided a grounding for these ideas.

Her commitment to the black experience continued in her second novel *Sula* (1973), in which she makes the community that she describes a living character. In this community, the individuals are distinctive and complex. They range from the schizophrenic war veteran Shadrack to the doggedly independent and mysteriously explosive Eva, a virtual matriarch who commits an act of violence in the work. The central, character, Sula, is posited as a dangerous figure. She does not fit easy stereotypes but is, ultimately, associated with evil. Many black critics appear to share the view that *Sula* is one of Morrison's best works because of its deconstruction and reconstruction of myths surrounding motherhood, race, gender, and class in American society.

Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977), has a male protagonist, Macon, or "Milkman," who embarks on a journey South to discover a lost family treasure. His mammon-centered quest becomes a quest for self-discovery and a discovery of his ancestry. Morrison structures this narrative around a series of folktales. The work climaxes in the dramatic and magical flight of Macon — a flight associated with the African slave's narrative of escape from the drudgery of slavery, which has been passed down through African American culture. *Song of Solomon* established Morrison's reputation as a writer. The work was awarded the National Book Critics' Circle Award and the National Book Award for best novel. Critics and reviewers commended the work for its narrative force and its complex examination of the history of the African American community.

In *Tar Baby* (1981), her fourth novel, Morrison expands her geographical boundaries, setting part of the novel in a fictional Caribbean island. The novel is a complex treatment of theories of sexuality and race that is couched in the African folktale of the "tar-baby." Morrison also includes in this text some examination of the traditions of black rebellions, as demonstrated in the Maroon lifestyle of Caribbean blacks during slavery.

In 1987, Morrison published *Beloved*, a frightening narrative about a slave woman who murders her child to prevent the child from becoming a slave. This horrifying act becomes a challenge for Morrison, who tries to articulate the realities that could make such an act possible. *Beloved* is layered with images and ideas that demonstrate Morrison's commitment to using actual historical "texts" as the basis for her consistently mythic approach to fiction writing. *Beloved* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and became a critically acclaimed film in 1998. In this work, as in all her novels, Morrison demonstrates a desire to speak to her own community or from that community. Morrison bluntly states that she writes for a black audience because she is writing for the village.

She demonstrates this trend most vividly in her novel *Jazz* (1992), in which she uses the most fascinating elements of this African American music form to shape her work. In *Jazz*, which is set in the 1920's during the heyday of jazz music and black innovation in the arts, Morrison applies the discipline and classical grounding of the music, its capacity to evoke the blues-like lament of black experience and history, and its improvisational nature to create a novel that is not explicitly about jazz music but is in fact jazz. The Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to Morrison largely on the strength of this, her sixth novel.

## Summary

Toni Morrison has done in her fiction writing what August Wilson has achieved in drama since the 1970's. These writers share the distinction of providing American literature with an insight into the dignity and richness

of African American culture in a manner that both chronicles the history of this culture and celebrates its uniquely brilliant ethos through the use of language, folk forms, and narrative traditions. As a commentator on her own work, Morrison has brilliantly analyzed her lyrical sensibility and has managed to contextualize the experience of the African American artist in American literature. Her work represents possibility and legitimizes the inclination of African American artists to delve into the African American experience without fear of being deemed irrelevant, inaccessible, or parochial. She has also demonstrated this commitment in her editorial work. Her crucial role in the publication of Middleton Harris' *The Black Book* (1974) demonstrates her concern for preserving images of African culture in America's collective consciousness.

Apart from her talent as an artist, Morrison brings an intensely political engagement to her art. She constantly speaks of the irrelevance of work that is not political. Politics, for her, embraces the elements of relevance, accountability, and truth. She is a leading voice among African American women writers who are not afraid to emphasize their political discourse. Others who share this ethos and who speak of Morrison's leadership in this regard include Toni Cade Bambara, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and Maya Angelou.

Morrison has worked as a teacher and an editor for most of her adult life, and she continues to bring these skills to bear on her own work. She is a committed defender of the rights of women and speaks up against injustices against women. More important, she has supplied intelligent and cogent criticism of the white feminist movement from the perspective of an African American woman.

Essay by: Kwame Dawes

## Bibliography

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Toni Morrison*. New York: Chelsea House, 1990. A fine selection of criticism on Morrison, with an excellent introduction by Bloom and an extensive bibliography.

Conner, Marc C., ed. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000. A collection of essays concentrating on the imagery and stylistics of Morrison's writings and her ability to convey the "unspeakable" aspects of African American experience.

Fultz, Lucille P. *Toni Morrison: Playing with Difference*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. An examination of Morrison's approach to differences (for example, black and white, male and female, wealth and poverty) in her intricate narratives.

Furman, Jan. *Toni Morrison's Fiction*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996. Part of the Understanding Contemporary American Literature series, this book addresses such topics as black womanhood, male consciousness, and community and cultural identity in Morrison's novels. Includes bibliography and index.

Furman, Jan, ed. *Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon."* New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. The essays collected in this volume represent the major critical responses to Morrison's novel; intended as a starting point for students first encountering the book.

Harris, Trudier. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. A collection of essays that examine Morrison's novels from an African and African American mythological and folkloric perspective and examine the archetypes and antiheroes that pervade her stories. An important scholarly guide to understanding the subtext of Morrison's work.

Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998. An excellent source of literary criticism. Contains bibliography and index.

McKay, Nellie Y., ed. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988. This volume, which is part of a series on American literature, firmly places Morrison on the list as one of the "most important writers in America." A compilation of reprinted essays by various authors, nine of which are original and written specifically for this publication. Also includes reviews, interviews, and literary criticism of Morrison's first four novels. A diverse and comprehensive work on Morrison. No bibliography.

Middleton, David L. *Toni Morrison: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1987. The articles and essays by Morrison and the interviews with her listed here are arranged chronologically to present clearly the evolution of her ideas. Includes critical reviews of her fiction and a listing of honors and awards. Subject index provided. An indispensable guide.

Otten, Terry. *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. In this groundbreaking study of Morrison's first five novels, Otten explores the mythic substance in her writings by tracing the motif of the biblical fall. Insightful readings and unflagging attention to the historical and literary backdrop. A valuable guide to the increasing scholarship on Morrison.

Peach, Linden, ed. *Toni Morrison*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. Focuses on interpretation and criticism of Morrison's works and examines African American women in literature. Provides bibliography and index.

Samuels, Wilfred D., and Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Toni Morrison*. Boston: Twayne, 1990. This study analyzes five of Morrison's novels, including *Beloved*. The authors explore common themes such as black folklore and mysticism in Morrison's writings. Contains excerpts from interviews.

Tally, Justine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007. Morrison's novels and short stories are discussed in this collection of essays, which delves into questions of gender, race, and class. This volume also offers readers a comprehensive look at the author's political views and how they manifested themselves in her writing.

Tate, Claudia, ed. *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum, 1983. This book is made up of interviews with Morrison and other black women writers. The Morrison interview contains some of her most cogent and forthright expressions of her commitment to politics in writing and a black or Afrocentric aesthetic.

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Sula

## What We Know: Gathering Background Knowledge

For each of the following, find someone who knows the information; have them tell you the story/information and write it down. If no one knows the information, do some research on the internet.

1. What is the Biblical story involving Shadrack? Please tell it.
  2. What is Eve's role in the Bible? What is Adam's role as related to the animals?
  3. What is the story of Tar Baby from the Uncle Remus tales?
  4. What is the story of Chicken Little?
  5. What happened to the Chicago boy named Emmett Till in the 1950s?
  6. What is a "Private" in the Army?

7. What was the role of African-American soldiers in World War I?
8. How did Ohio and Louisiana differ in laws about slavery before the Civil War?
9. What were Jim Crow laws?
10. What is a goober?
11. What is a Kentucky Wonder?
12. What is Creole?