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# Toni Morrison: Biography

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# Toni Morrison (1931- )

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[A Yemisi Jimoh \(University of Massachusetts Amherst\)](#)

(Chloe Anthony Wofford)

Dramatist/ Playwright, Essayist, Novelist,  
Poet, Political writer, Story-writer,  
Children's/Young Adult writer, Editor,  
Publisher, Teacher/ Professor.  
Active 1970- in United States

Few writers achieve the unusual distinction of receiving commercial success along with the most distinguished acclaim and awards available in arts and letters: Nobel Prize for Literature; Pulitzer Prize in Fiction; National Book Award (nomination); American Book Award; National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in the same year; appointment to the National Council on the

Arts; election to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters; Condorcet Medal; member of the Schomburg Center Commission for the Preservation of Black Culture; National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters; National Endowment for the Humanities' Jefferson Lecturer; numerous honorary degrees; four months on the best-sellers' list; two books, in different genres, listed simultaneously on the best-sellers' list; Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Such eminence, however, is the case for Toni Morrison, a writer who has received or been nominated for every major literary honor.

In 1931, during the early years of the great economic Depression, George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford's second child of four was born. The couple named their daughter Chloe Ardelia Wofford. She would begin to call herself Toni in the 1950s while an undergraduate at Howard University.

Morrison's father, whose primary employment was as a ship-welder, though he held several jobs in order to ensure his family's survival, migrated from Georgia to Ohio seeking refuge from the Jim Crow segregation of the South. Her maternal grandparents, Ardelia Willis and John Solomon Willis, had migrated initially

from Alabama to Kentucky with their twelve children. John Solomon Willis learned how to read through his own efforts and those of his sister; he was also a self-taught violinist. Willis inherited eighty-eight acres of land from his Native American mother, Morrison's great-grandmother. The story of how he lost his land to unscrupulous white men and was forced to work as a sharecropper on that land figures prominently in Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977). From Kentucky the Willises moved to Ohio, after finding that the young, white teacher in the small, rural southern school which their daughters attended had to learn long division from the Willises' girls. In Ohio, they believed, their children would receive a better education than was available to them in the South. Ramah Willis, Toni Morrison's mother, was a high school graduate, and Morrison is the first of her family to earn a college degree, though not the first to attend college.

Toni Morrison spent her childhood and youth in the small Midwestern steel-town of Lorain, Ohio, located just twenty-five miles west of Cleveland and comprised primarily of European immigrants and a small number of African American migrants from the South.

During the 1930s and 1940s, when Morrison lived in Lorain, most of the residents lived on meagre incomes, which were supplemented with community support and government relief. Morrison's life in Lorain, outside of school, was firmly situated among a small community, twenty-three blocks, of black residents. The Woffords were great storytellers as well as believers in spiritual or mystical ways of knowing. Morrison's memories of her family's unquestioned acceptance of, and belief in, mystical occurrences, the stories of her parents' lives, as well as the folktales she heard while young, influence her deep sense of the importance of African American history and culture as well as her uses of that culture and history in her writing.

Toni Morrison also values her mid-western, Ohio, upbringing, as it has influenced her writing by providing her an imaginative terrain on which to operate without the yoke of stereotypes. Morrison says, "It is neither plantation nor Ghetto". While Morrison's life in a small Ohio town locates her outside the typical pigeonholes in which many will frequently discuss African American life, this environment also positions her firmly within the crosswinds of the politics of color and the

social construction of race along with its resulting racialized social and political policies. Ohio is a state that has a long and valued abolitionist history, including an important role in the Underground Railroad, yet Morrison also reports that, as a border state with Kentucky, the Ku Klux Klan could be found in Ohio (Taylor-Guthrie 158)

In 1949, after graduating at the top her high school class, Chloe Wofford left Lorain, Ohio, and moved to Washington D.C. where she attended Howard University. While a student at Howard, Morrison gained her first sustained exposure to the South after she joined the Howard University Players, a repertory troupe that traveled through the South during the summers. She also changed her name to Toni. Morrison completed her Bachelor's degree in 1953 at Howard University before moving to Ithaca, New York to attend Cornell University. Her Cornell University Master's thesis, "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated" addresses the issue of suicide in both modernist writers. Morrison had planned to become a teacher when she began her education at Howard University, though her youthful aspiration in Lorain was to become a dancer. Following the

completion of her Master's degree at Cornell in 1955, Morrison was employed as an English instructor at Texas Southern University, which, like Howard, to which she would return as an instructor in 1957, is an historically black university.

Within a year of Chloe "Toni" Wofford's return to Washington, D.C. to teach in her alma mater, she married Harold Morrison, an architect. During their short marriage, the couple would have two sons, Harold Ford, whose middle name was selected in honor of Morrison's family name, and Kevin Slade. While employed as an instructor in English and humanities at Howard University, Toni Morrison joined a small writers' group in which the participants were required to write literary pieces and present them to the group for critique. For this group, Morrison hurriedly wrote a short story about a black girl who desired blue eyes. Morrison would return to this story several years later while living in New York. The expanded and revised version of this story would become her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which Holt, Rinehart, and Winston published in 1970. *The Bluest Eye*, which was published at the height of the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement of the 1960s and 1970s,

addresses the crucial issue of identity and the ways in which both community and society contribute – sometimes in damaging ways – to the shaping of identity. Morrison's first novel received modest critical attention and primarily tepid reviews, as *The Bluest Eye* was misunderstood by most of its contemporary reviewers and only found an enthusiastic reception in reviews that appeared in *Black World* and *Freedomways*.

Following the end of her marriage and after leaving the teaching position at Howard because she lacked the Ph.D. required for tenure, Toni Morrison eventually obtained a position in 1965 as associate editor at L. W. Singer in Syracuse, New York, the textbook division of the publishing conglomerate Random House. It was during this time that Morrison returned to her story about the little black girl who wanted blue eyes. Toni Morrison re-wrote this story in the evenings after working at Singer and after settling her children in for the night. By 1968 Morrison was the senior editor for trade publications at Random House in New York City. She worked as senior editor for Random House until 1983. While there, Morrison edited books by Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, Henry Dumas,



Lucille Clifton, Leon Forrest, Gayle Jones, June Jordan, James Alan McPherson, John McClusky, Gloria Naylor, and many others. As an editor, Toni Morrison also was instrumental in the publication of *The Black Book* (1974), an innovative collection of historical documents related to African American heritage. While working to bring this project to press, Morrison happened upon a nineteenth-century newspaper story about Margaret Garner, a fugitive from slavery who killed her child to avoid returning the child to forced bondage. This story would form the basis for Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved* (1987).

In 1971, while still employed as a senior editor at Random House, Morrison began teaching at the State University of New York at Purchase, and since then has taught or lectured at numerous colleges and universities, including Yale, Bard, Harvard, Rutgers, Trinity College Cambridge, the State University of New York at Albany, the University of California at Berkeley, Bowdoin College, and Princeton.

Despite the fact that her second novel, *Sula*, received mixed reviews, Toni Morrison's finely-honed literary ability had established for her a place in the world of letters and also marked

the beginning of her ongoing publishing relationship with Alfred A. Knopf, which has published all of her novels since *Sula* was released in 1973. As Morrison's stature in the literary world increased, she began to publish regularly in the *New York Times Book Review* and in the *New York Times Magazine*; she continues to contribute articles to a number of journals, newspapers, and magazines. Among the numerous noteworthy essays by Toni Morrison that have appeared in print during her more than thirty years as a writer and cultural analyst are "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature", which appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review* in 1989, "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib", which was published in *New York Times Magazine* in 1971, and "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", which was included in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, edited by Mari Evans. In all of the aforementioned essays, Morrison presents provocative positions on African American culture and challenges individuals who work with cultural concepts to approach African American cultural issues on their own terms rather than encumbering them with concepts and ideas

that do not explain African American culture, or worse, that disparage it.

Much of Morrison's literary corpus provides representative examples of literary archaeology, as some would term it. This approach to literature combines a writer's imagination and experience along with recovered history to produce what Toni Morrison refers to as "village literature" or "village fiction" (LeClair 26, Morrison 39). The first novel in Morrison's oeuvre in which she most effectively combines the above aspects of African American culture is *Song of Solomon*, which she wrote while grieving the loss of her father. In this novel, Morrison applies her capacious imagination to African American folktales, to her family history, and to social and political history in the United States. This same combination of imaginative, social, and political energies informs Toni Morrison's presumptive trilogy on love: *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1998). These novels gain a substantial part of their power from the events that informed Morrison's writing of them: the fugitive Margaret Garner; quotidian black life in New York City during the New Negro era; the formation of black towns throughout the

South and in southern border states following the failures of Reconstruction late in the nineteenth century. Additionally, because of her understanding of African American heritage, her literary aesthetic is informed by Jazz music, which produces a style that is sophisticated and accessible, if engaged with a moderate quantity of effort. Toni Morrison's fourth novel, *TarBaby* (1981), takes an imaginative twentieth-century cosmopolitan approach to an African and African American folk concept – the tar baby. Morrison employs her complex writing style in her eighth and ninth novels, *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008), in order to return to issues and concerns found in her earlier narratives. In *Love* she reimagines her previous representation of female friendship, and in *A Mercy*, Morrison examines slavery and other varieties of servitude in seventeenth-century British Colonial North America.

Toni Morrison is a prolific woman of letters whose contribution to the cultural landscape of the United States expands beyond her novels. Among Morrison's three books that appeared in print in 1992 is her seminal work of literary theory, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. This book

reproduces her Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilizations, which she presented at Harvard University in 1990. She is also the editor or co-editor of numerous books, including *Rac-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); and *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Trial* (1997). Morrison's artistic work also includes a short story, "Recitatif" (1983); a play, *Dreaming Emmett*, which was performed in Albany, New York in 1986; lyrics, "Honey and Rue", written in 1992 for acclaimed opera singer Kathleen Battle and published in 1995; a children's book, *The Big Box* (1999), co-written with Slade Morrison, her son; in 2002 Morrison's poem "black crazies" was published in *MS*; and a libretto for the opera *Margaret Garner*, which premiered in 2005. While Morrison has not written a screenplay, two of her novels have been developed into a screenplay. Toni Cade Bambara wrote a film treatment for Morrison's fourth novel *Tar Baby*, and the film rights to *Beloved* were sold to Oprah Winfrey who starred in and produced a motion picture

based on the book.

Toni Morrison continues to influence culture in the United States through her writing and lecturing. She is currently the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Humanities, Emerita at Princeton University. Her tenth novel *Home* will be published May 2012.

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