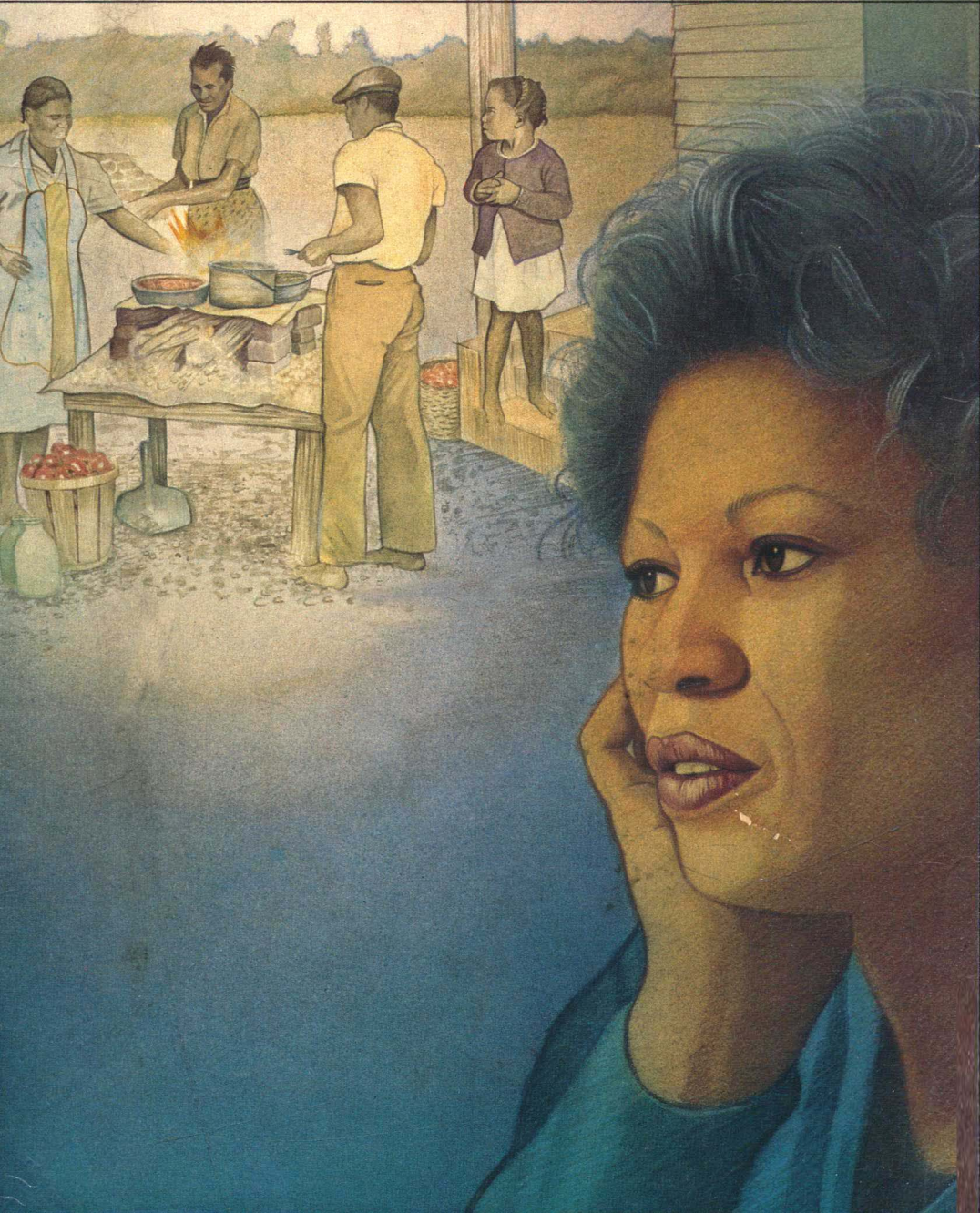


Modern Critical Views

TONI
MORRISON

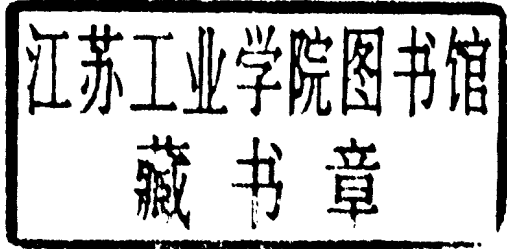
Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



Modern Critical Views

TONI MORRISON

Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom



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Cover illustration: The novelist Toni Morrison is shown against the background of the poignant scene in *Sula* where Sula observes the terror of Hannah suffering the outburst of fire, which will lead to her tragic death.—H. B.

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best literary criticism so far devoted to the novels of Toni Morrison. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am indebted to Mary Lawlor for her devotion and skill as a researcher for this volume.

My introduction attempts a tentative estimation of Morrison's achievement, in the daunting context of her prime precursor figures, Faulkner and Woolf. The chronological sequence of criticism begins with Cynthia A. Davis's investigation of some of the mythic patterns of African-American communitarian freedom that Morrison sets against white America's psychic violence. Hortense J. Spillers, comparing Morrison's *Sula* to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, gives us a historical sense of changes in black female characterization.

In Keith E. Byerman's judgment, Morrison's fiction quests for a black selfhood that might negate the destructive control of white symbolic systems, and finds instances of an uncontaminated selfhood in irrational and fantastic elements of African-American experience. Madonne M. Miner, writing on *The Bluest Eye*, finds in Pecula's fate not the sign of tragedy, but of hope, the hope necessarily involved in African-American female testimony.

Morrison's *Tar Baby* is seen by Terry Otten as an instance of the novelist's incessant exposure of the victim's crime of innocence, when the victim is a black female in a white male cosmos of concepts and values. In Melvin Dixon's essay, symbolic geography becomes another of Morrison's fictive devices for subverting the value systems that alienate African-Americans from their own culture. The Canadian poet-novelist Margaret Atwood salutes Morrison's *Beloved* as a major vision of slavery, and as a realistic novel audacious enough to evoke supernatural dimensions.

Sula is the focus of Deborah E. McDowell's argument that Morrison's achievement also includes an undermining of any heroic myth of black male identity, while *Beloved* receives an unreserved appreciation from Roger Sale. Theodore O. Mason, Jr., analyzing *Song of Solomon*, finds in it a more traditional Toni Morrison than critics generally acclaim. His Morrison is a tale teller and reteller who uses her stories to bind communities together.

In an essay published for the first time in this book, Marilyn Sanders Mobley considers *Beloved* as Morrison's ironic revision of the genre of the slave narrative, a revision that attempts to compel African-American readers to confront a repressed element in their own past. Toni Morrison herself concludes this volume with her powerful polemic on how white American authors and critics have repressed the African-American presence in American literature.

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Introduction

Toni Morrison, in a speculative essay on literary canon-making (included in this volume), proposes the difficult critical quest of uncovering the hidden obsession with African-Americans that has haunted the American novel throughout its history. Her principal example is to sketch a reading of *Moby-Dick* in which Ahab's manic obsessiveness with the whiteness of the whale becomes a synecdoche for white America's compulsive relation to the African-American aspects of its culture, past and present. Morrison's reading is in the mode of D. H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, where what Lawrence saw as the doom of the white race is prefigured in Ahab's compulsiveness. I am of many minds about Morrison's critical project, if only because it would give yet another dimension to the unhappy procedure of uncovering just how much of white America cannot be exorcised from African-American fiction. Morrison's five novels, culminating so far in *Be-loved*, are possible candidates for entering an American canon founded upon what I insist would be aesthetic criteria alone, if we still retain any such criteria after our current age of politicized response to narrative, dramas, and poems has passed.

Morrison, like any potentially strong novelist, battles against being subsumed by the traditions of narrative fiction. As a leader of African-American literary culture, Morrison is particularly intense in resisting critical characterizations that she believes misrepresent her own loyalties, her social and political fealties to the complex cause of her people. If one is a student of literary influence as such, and I am, then one's own allegiances as a critic are aesthetic, as I insist mine are. One is aware that the aesthetic has been a mask for those who would deny vital differences in gender, race, social class, and yet it need not be an instrument for the prolongation of exploiting

forces. The aesthetic stance, as taught by Ruskin, Pater, and Wilde, enhances a reader's apprehension of perception and sensation. Such a mode of knowing literature seems to me inescapable, despite times like our own, in which societal and historical resentments, all with their own validity, tend to crowd out aesthetic considerations. Yet, as an artist, Morrison has few affinities with Zora Neale Hurston or Ralph Ellison, or with other masters of African-American fiction. Her curious resemblance to certain aspects of D. H. Lawrence does not ensue from the actual influence of Lawrence, but comes out of the two dominant precursors who have shaped her narrative sensibility, William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Faulkner and Woolf have little in common, but if you mixed them potently enough you might get Lawrence, or Toni Morrison.

Lest this seem a remote matter to a passionate reader of Morrison, I would observe mildly that one function of literary study is to help us make choices, because choice is inescapable, this late in Western cultural history. I do not believe that Morrison writes fiction of a kind I am not yet competent to read and judge, because I attend to her work with pleasure and enlightenment, amply rewarded by the perception and sensation that her art generates. Reading Alice Walker or Ishmael Reed, I cannot trust my own aesthetic reactions, and decide that their mode of writing must be left to critics more responsive than myself. But then I reflect that every reader must choose for herself or himself. Does one read and reread the novels of Alice Walker, or of Toni Morrison? I reread Morrison because her imagination, whatever her social purposes, transcends ideology and polemics, and enters again into the literary space occupied only by fantasy and romance of authentic aesthetic dignity. Extraliterary purposes, however valid or momentous they may be for a time, ebb away; and we are left with story, characters, and style, that is to say, with literature or the lack of literature. Morrison's five novels to date leave us with literature, and not with a manifesto for social change, however necessary and admirable such change would be in our America of Chairman Atwater, Senator Helms, President Bush, and the other luminaries of what we ought to go on calling the Willie Horton election of 1988.

Morrison herself has made very clear that she prefers to be contextualized in African-American literature, or in an American literature that ceases to repress the African-American presence. I am neither a feminist nor an African-American critic, nor am I a Marxist, a deconstructor, a Lacanian, a New Historicist, a semiotician. And yet I scarcely would agree with several of the contributors to this volume, who would maintain that my theories of literary influence simply reduce to yet another logocentric, capitalistic,

white male symbolic system that has no validity or relevance for reading and understanding the work of an African-American feminist and Marxist novelist. Literary texts emerge from other literary texts, and they do not choose their forerunners. They are as overdetermined aesthetically as their human makers are overdetermined erotically. It is a great sorrow that we cannot choose whom we are free to love, and it is almost an equal sorrow that the gifted cannot choose their gift, or even the bestowers of their gift. We are free to choose our ideologies, but eros and art, however intertwined they are with cultural politics, cannot be reduced to cultural politics alone. As an African-American woman, Toni Morrison has developed a powerful stance that intervenes forcefully in the cultural politics of her time and place, the United States as it stumbles towards the year 2000 of the Common Era. As a novelist, a rhetorical tale-teller, Toni Morrison was found by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, two quite incompatible artists, except perhaps for the effect that James Joyce had upon both of them. Morrison's marvelous sense of female character and its fate in male contexts is an extraordinary modification of Woolfian sensibility, and yet the aura of Woolf always lingers on in Morrison's prose, even as Joyce's presence can be felt so strongly in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Faulkner's mode of narration is exquisitely modulated by Morrison, but the accent of Faulkner always can be heard in Morrison's narrators, even as Joseph Conrad's authorial stance never quite left Faulkner. Consider the plangent closing passages of *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*:

And now when I see her searching the garbage—for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, it's much, much, much too late.

—*The Bluest Eye*

Shadrack and Nel moved in opposite directions, each thinking separate thoughts about the past. The distance between them increased as they both remembered gone things.

Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little. "Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees. "Sula?"

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.

—*Sula*

Milkman stopped waving and narrowed his eyes. He could just make out Guitar's head and shoulders in the dark. "You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it? Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.

—*Song of Solomon*

Even decontextualized, without the narratives that they culminate, these conclusions retain considerable lyrical and dramatic vitality. If I stumbled upon them anywhere, I would know them for Morrison's fictional prose, and I do not hear any voices in them except for Morrison's passionate and caring cry of the human, her own particular eloquence. And yet part of appreciating Morrison's command here of sensation and perception involves attending to the genealogy of her art. It is not a question of allusion or of echoing but of style, stance, tone, prose rhythm, and mimetic mode, and these do stem from an amalgam of Faulkner and Woolf, the father and mother of Morrison's art, as it were. Woolf and Faulkner are poets of loss, who search past and present for the negative epiphanies of vanished moments, possibilities, radiances, hopes. The narrative voice in Morrison turns always upon the negative magic of the romancer. Her perfect sentence is: "If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it." That is her epitome, but it would serve also for the most Morrisonian beings in Faulkner: Darl Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* and Lena Grove in *Light in August*. And it would illuminate also the perfect heroine of Woolf, Clarissa Dalloway, whose sensibility hovers at making that surrender in the air that Septimus Smith made, only to discover that he could not ride it. The pure madness of integrities of being

that cannot sustain or bear dreadful social structures is as much Morrison's center (and not just in *The Bluest Eye*) as it is Woolf's and, with a difference, Faulkner's. The most authentic power in Morrison's work is the romance writer's sense that "it's much, much, much too late," that one's cry of grief and loss "had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow." In some sense, all of Morrison's protagonists leap wheeling towards the death struggle, with the fine abandon of Faulkner's doom-eager men and women. Toni Morrison, in her time and place, answering to the travail of her people, speaks to the needs of an era, but her art comes out of a literary tradition not altogether at one with her cultural politics.

CYNTHIA A. DAVIS

*Self, Society, and Myth
in Toni Morrison's Fiction*

Toni Morrison's novels have attracted both popular and critical attention for their inventive blend of realism and fantasy, unsparing social analysis, and passionate philosophical concerns. The combination of social observation with broadening and allusive commentary gives her fictions the symbolic quality of myth, and in fact the search for a myth adequate to experience is one of Morrison's central themes. Because her world and characters are inescapably involved with problems of perception, definition, and meaning, they direct attention to Morrison's own ordering view and its implications.

All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here is less a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives. The theme of "invisibility" is, of course, a common one in black American literature, but Morrison avoids the picture of the black person "invisible" in white life (Ellison's *Invisible Man* trying to confront passersby). Instead, she immerses the reader in the black community; the white society's ignorance of that concrete, vivid, and diverse world is thus even more striking.

The constant censorship of and intrusion on black life from the surrounding society is emphasized not by specific events so much as by a consistent pattern of misnaming. Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception. The world of all three novels¹ is

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distinguished by the discrepancy between name and reality. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for example, opens with a primer description of a "typical" American family: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house." And so on (*Eye*, p. 1). Portions of that description reappear as chapter headings for the story of black lives, all removed in various degrees from the textbook "reality."² *Sula* (1973) begins with a description of the black neighborhood "called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills" (*Sula*, p. 4): another misnamed, even reversed situation, in this case the result of a white man's greedy joke. The same pattern is extended in *Song of Solomon* (1977): for example, the first pages describe "Not Doctor Street, a name the post office did not recognize," and "No Mercy Hospital" (*Song*, pp. 3, 4). Both names are unofficial; the black experience they represent is denied by the city fathers who named Mains Avenue and Mercy Hospital. And *Song of Solomon* is full of characters with ludicrous, multiple, or lost names, like the first Macon Dead, who received "this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army" (*Song*, p. 18). In all these cases, the misnaming does not eliminate the reality of the black world; invisibility is not non-existence. But it does reflect a distortion. Blacks are visible to white culture only insofar as they fit its frame of reference and serve its needs. Thus they are consistently reduced and reified, losing their independent reality. Mrs. Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* has a nickname, "Polly," that only whites use; it reduces her dignity and identifies her as "the ideal servant" (*Eye*, p. 99). When the elegant Helene Wright becomes just "gal" to a white conductor, she and her daughter Nel feel that she is "flawed," "really custard" under the elegant exterior (*Sula*, pp. 17–19).

To some extent this problem is an inescapable ontological experience. As Sartre has pointed out, human relations revolve around the experience of "the Look," for being "seen" by another both confirms one's reality and threatens one's sense of freedom: "I grasp the Other's look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities." Alone, I can see myself as pure consciousness in a world of possible projects; the Other's look makes me see myself as an object in another perception. "The Other as a look is only that—my transcendence transcended."³ If I can make the other into an object in my world, I can "transcend" him: "Thus my project of recovering myself is fundamentally a project of absorbing the Other" (*BN*, p. 340). The result is a cycle of conflicting and shifting subject-object relationships in which both sides try simultaneously to remain in control of the relationship and to use the Other's look to confirm identity.