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Toni Morrison

Sandra Adell

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TONI MORRISON

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For my mother, Edna Eugenia Qualls (in Memoriam)

and for my sisters

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A NOTE TO THE READER

THE TELLER IN THE TALE

by Alvin Kernan,
Senior Advisor in
the Humanities,
The Andrew W.
Mellon Foundation

A few years ago it was fashionable to speak of “the death of the author” and to argue that “language writes, not the man.” These post-modernist views were part of a philosophy that discounted the individuality of the writer in favor of a world of impersonal texts and systems, such as language, which furnish a “scriptor” with the only conceptions of reality he or she can have. In this view of things the author disappeared into a “mere grammatical subject”; the time and place were doing the writing, not the author.

This vast, gray, impersonal view has not prevailed, however, because it goes against the grain of what we all know and feel to be the actual case. Historically, our literature is not just a set of coded texts but living writings intertwined with the names of the men and women who wrote them. We cannot think of *The Canterbury Tales* without thinking of the sly but somewhat bumbling Geoffrey Chaucer, good-natured but sharply ironic, who introduces himself as one of the pilgrims in his own poem. And we try our best to see William Shakespeare, always a somewhat mysterious fellow, in the figure of the magician Prospero on his magic island in *The Tempest*. Charles Dickens, as a frightened boy sent to work in the blacking factory in industrialized London, hangs about his novels in the same way that Ernest Hemingway in his macho pose and his death by suicide is always present when we turn the pages of *A Farewell to Arms* or the “Up in Michigan” stories. As in the last example, the lives of the poets often throw dark shadows back on their works. The alcoholic F. Scott Fitzgerald ends his life trying desperately to write another novel as good as his early *The Great Gatsby*. Flannery O’Connor sits in her small house in Georgia, suffering from a disease—lupus—that ravages her immune system, and records experiences of Americans who are as vulnerable to the world as is her own body.

The teller not only writes the tale, but, in doing so, he or she becomes a part of it, and our sense of the tale is not complete until the teller's presence is evoked. This is one reason why biographies and vignettes, collections of biographical information, and memories of the type found in these volumes about our writers are so interesting and so useful. More than useful, really. We have not fully read the tale until we can see the teller in it, who will, if we come to know him or her well enough, sensitize us to how the tale is told and what is likely to be in it. Every tale-teller has a distinctive way of telling—the style—and a particular subject matter. To know who is writing is, therefore, to know to look for things that would otherwise escape us. Theodore Dreiser, the American novelist, was a moody man, pessimistic about the possibilities of life, convinced that our fates are woven from a host of small details, the need for a winter coat in *Sister Carrie* or the bright attractiveness of an upper-middle-class parlor in *An American Tragedy*. These ordinary details can in their bulk bore us and turn us away from the story if we are not aware that this is the Dreiserian signature, the way in which he renders the flatness of ordinary life and points to the fate that lies concealed in it.

Every author differs from every other in how and what he or she writes, but in the end they combine, if we see and know them well enough, to create a scene that is close to the center of literature, to its place and role in the world. Some writing careers portray this scene more powerfully than others do. Samuel Johnson, for example, was a personality so titanic as nearly to overwhelm his writings, physically grotesque, frequently nearly mad with depression, an impoverished hack most of his life, endlessly talking for victory and heroically facing the hard facts of human life. In Johnson's life, writing his great dictionary of the English language or his *Lives of the Poets* was his defense against the madness of emptiness and meaninglessness. That is to say, he wrote to preserve his sanity by giving order and meaning to the world and to the language through which we approach it.

Every teller of tales, when we come to know him or her, is engaged in something like this Johnsonian struggle to order and make sense of the world of random facts and experiences, to preserve some sense of things, people, and times that would otherwise be forgotten and lost forever in the past. Consider another writer, our own Southern novelist William Faulkner, a struggler who is not as successful as Johnson in his authorial task of imposing order on a messy and painful sense of the confusions of life. Faulkner's story is that of a mythical Mississippi county, Yoknapatawpha County, that he creates in an attempt to locate and order in time and space the confused and confusing memories of the

Southern past, such as the Civil War and slavery and primitive wilderness, with modern-day consciousness that cannot forget the past but also cannot reconcile it with its own immediate interests and thoughts. The strain shows in Faulkner's stories, in the absence of clear chronology, in the tangled syntax of his long sentences, in his frequent descent into stream-of-consciousness writing.

To include the tellers with their tales, which is what this series of the Gale Study Guides is designed to make possible for the common reader, is to see the heroic scene of literature itself, throughout the world, where men and women writers make and have made the most skillful use of the word-hoard of language and the freedom of fiction to preserve our collective past and to make sense out of things that in their multitude are always threatening to fly apart into chaos.

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1931: Chloe Anthony Wofford (Toni Morrison) is born on 18 February in Lorain, Ohio, the second of four children of George Wofford, a shipyard welder, and Ramah Willis Wofford.
- 1949: Morrison graduates with honors from Lorain High School. She enrolls at Howard University in Washington, D.C.
- 1953: Morrison graduates from Howard University with a B.A. in English and a minor in Classics. She begins graduate study at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.
- 1955: Morrison receives an M.A. in English literature from Cornell University. She begins teaching at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas.
- 1957: Morrison leaves Texas Southern. She joins the faculty at Howard University.
- 1958: Morrison marries Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect.
- 1961: Morrison gives birth to her first son, Harold Ford.
- 1962: Morrison joins a writer's group. She writes a short story that she later develops into the novel titled *The Bluest Eye* (1970).
- 1964: Morrison visits Paris. She and Harold Morrison are divorced. She returns to Lorain, Ohio, where her son Slade is born. Morrison leaves Howard.
- 1965: Morrison leaves Ohio with her children for Syracuse, New York, to take a job as an assistant editor with a textbook subsidiary of Random House. While there, she works on *The Bluest Eye*.

- 1967: Morrison transfers to the trade-book division of Random House in New York City. Over the course of her twenty-year career as an editor for Random House, she works with many African American writers, including Leon Forrest, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, and Henry Dumas.
- 1970: Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is published.
- 1971: Morrison teaches English for a year at the State University of New York at Purchase while continuing to work at Random House.
- 1973: *Sula* is published.
- 1974: Morrison edits *The Black Book*.
- 1975: *Sula* is nominated for the National Book Award in fiction.
- 1976: Morrison spends a year at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, as a visiting lecturer.
- 1977: *Song of Solomon* is published and is a Main Selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club. It wins the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction.
- 1980: Morrison is named Distinguished Writer by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She is appointed to the National Council on the Arts by President Jimmy Carter.
- 1981: *Tar Baby* is published; Morrison is featured on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. She is elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Writers Guild, and the Authors' League.
- 1984: Morrison leaves Random House. She is named Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York at Albany.
- 1986: Morrison's first play, *Dreaming Emmett*, is performed on 4 January by the Capital Repertory Theater of Albany at the Marketplace Theater in Albany, New York. Morrison becomes a visiting lecturer at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York.
- 1987: *Beloved* is published. Morrison is appointed to the Helsinki Watch Committee and to the Board of Trustees of the New

York Public Library. She chairs the New York State Education Department's Committee on Adult Literacy and is Regents Lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley.

- 1988: *Beloved* wins the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, the Robert F Kennedy Book Award, and the Melcher Book Award. Morrison's visiting lectureship at Bard College ends.
- 1989: Morrison is named Robert F Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University, thus becoming the first African American woman to hold a named chair at an Ivy League university. She receives the Modern Language Association of America Commonwealth Award in literature and the Chianti Ruffino Antico Fattore International Award in literature.
- 1992: *Jazz* is published and makes *The New York Times* best-seller list; *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, a collection of Morrison's essays, is published. Morrison edits *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*. *Honey and Rue*, an operatic piece with music by André Previn and words by Morrison, is performed at Carnegie Hall in January 1992, featuring soprano Kathleen Battle.
- 1993: Morrison wins the Nobel Prize in literature, the eighth woman and the first African American woman to be so honored. She receives the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Award from the National Organization for Women. Morrison's house on the Hudson River north of New York City burns to the ground on Christmas Day.
- 1994: Morrison receives the Condorcet Medal and the Pearl S. Buck Award.
- 1995: Morrison collaborates with drummer Max Roach and choreographer Bill T. Jones on *Degga*, a performance piece for the Lincoln Center Serious Fun "American Visionaries" Summer Festival. She receives an honorary doctorate from Howard University on 3 March. The Lorain Public Library in Lorain, Ohio, dedicates a library reading room in her honor.
- 1996: Morrison wins the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. *The Dancing Mind: Speech upon Acceptance of the National Book Foundation*

Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters on the Sixth of November, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety-Six, Morrison's National Book Award speech, is published. Talk-show host Oprah Winfrey selects *Song of Solomon* as the second offering of her book club, resulting in one million copies of the book being sold and a 25 percent increase in sales of her other novels.

- 1997: Morrison edits *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script, and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case* with Claudia Brodsky Lacour.
- 1998: *Paradise* is published. Winfrey selects it for her book club. Winfrey, also produces a film version of *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme.
- 1999: Morrison's first children's picture book, *The Big Box*, which she wrote with her son Slade, is published.
- 2000: *The Bluest Eye* is selected for Winfrey's book club. Morrison receives the National Humanities Medal.
- 2001: Morrison becomes the fifth recipient of the Enoch Pratt Society Lifetime Achievement Award.
- 2002: *Sula* is the forty-eighth and final selection for Winfrey's book club.



ABOUT TONI MORRISON

Born: 18 February 1931

Married: Harold Morrison, 1958 (divorced 1964)

Education: Howard University, Cornell University

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, on 18 February 1931, to George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. The second of four children, she was named Chloe Anthony Wofford. Her parents' roots, like those of many African Americans of their generation, can be traced to the South. The family of Morrison's mother was from Greenville, Alabama; her father's family was from Georgia. Morrison did not know her father's parents, who died before her mother and father met, but she remembers her mother's family well. John Solomon Willis, her maternal grandfather, once owned land in Alabama. He inherited it from his mother, a Native American who had been given eighty-eight acres by the government during Reconstruction. The family subsequently lost the land because of unpaid debts they did not know they owed and ended up working as sharecroppers for the new landowners.¹ John and his wife, Ardelia Willis, left Greenville around 1910 or 1912, settling first in Kentucky, where John worked in a coal mine, and then in Lorain, Ohio, a small Lake Erie steel-mill and port town located twenty-five miles west of Cleveland. The Willis family was part of what historians call the Great Migration, a period beginning in the late 1800s when many African Americans left the rural South for northern cities where work was plentiful and racism more tolerable.

George Wofford, Morrison's father, was about sixteen when he left his birthplace of Cartersville, Georgia, and headed north. He ended up in Lorain, Ohio, where he met and married Ramah Willis.² Shortly



Toni Morrison