

## **Morrison, Toni (1931–)**

A significant element of American counterculture involves critiquing white racism and cultural dominance. In fiction and non-fiction works renowned for their imaginative language and power, Toni Morrison unrelentingly asserts the realities and complexities of black life in America, making visible a presence which she argues has been erased and distorted since the founding of the American republic.

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford in the multiracial steel town of Lorain, Ohio on February 18, 1931, Morrison was one of four children of George Wofford and Ramah Willis Wofford. Her working-class parents taught her to read at a young age, and along with the maternal grandparents who shared the family home, imbued her with a deep understanding of African-American culture and community.

Morrison changed her name to Toni while attending Howard University, where she graduated in 1953, and went on to receive her master's degree in English from Cornell University in 1955. She married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, in 1958, and bore two sons before their divorce in 1964. Morrison took up the first of many academic posts after completing her master's, and also worked as an editor for Random House, acting as a mentor for many African American writers. She is best known as a novelist, but is also a literary critic, children's author, playwright, and lyricist. Her highly acclaimed novel *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, and in 1993 she became the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Morrison's success can be attributed in part to her gifts as a storyteller; she also draws heavily on African American folklore, ghost stories, songs, and history as

structuring elements of her stories. Her fiction is often highly rhythmic, presents frequent changes in the voice of the narrator, shifts back and forth in time, and moves effortlessly between the real and the supernatural. As a result, her writing has sometimes been characterized as unrealistic or confusing, but more often is celebrated for its lyricism and multiple layers of meaning.

Her writing is overtly political, and her focus on race, as well as class and gender, resonates strongly with central cultural concerns of late twentieth century America, as manifested in prominent social movements such as the civil rights movement, Black Power, and feminism. This is evident in her works of fiction, for example, in *The Bluest Eye* (1969) a young African American girl is literally driven mad in 1940s America by pernicious Eurocentric notions of beauty and as a result of being raped by her father. Set in the Caribbean, *Tar Baby* (1981) addresses themes of class and racial difference within the black community by exploring a fraught love affair between the affluent, highly educated model Jadine, and the handsome wastrel Son. On the subject of slavery, *Beloved* (1987) is a fictionalized account of the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave who murdered one of her own children in order to prevent her being sold into slavery.

Likewise Morrison's non-fiction focuses on issues of class, race and gender. The edited anthology, *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power* (1993), addresses allegations of sexual harassment investigated in the Senate nomination hearings of an African American nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court. Her first book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark* (1992), investigates the racism of the central texts of the American literary canon.

Toni Morrison provides a compelling African American literary voice within the anti-racist element of American counterculture.

*Julie Wuthnow*

### **Further Reading**

Anderson, Richard. *Toni Morrison*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2005.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A novel*. New York: Random House, 1987.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.