

Obituary: African-American novelist Toni Morrison dead at 88

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Toni Morrison, author of 11 novels as well as works of criticism, essays and children's books, died in New York City on August 3, from complications of pneumonia. She embodied some of the essential contradictions of contemporary fiction: on the one hand, the burning need to credibly depict the lives, thoughts and feelings of the oppressed and, on the other, the dominance in official literary culture of upper-middle-class identity politics and the steady movement to the right by such circles.

Morrison personified this contradiction and it largely defined her career. She was at once both an honest chronicler of important realms of experience and a propagandist for a deeply false view of American history and society. Her novels could often soar as art, but her promotion of the concept that race and sometimes gender are the driving forces of the social process served to obscure significant truths and spread confusion.

Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford and raised in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, the child of a homemaker and a welder. Along with millions of other African-Americans, her parents had moved from the rural South for a life free of systemic racism and for economic opportunity. As a child, a vindictive landlord set fire to the property while her family was inside. Her parents encouraged her to read, and told stories from the African-American oral tradition.

Lorain was a racially integrated industrial city of about 50,000, 30 miles west of Cleveland. The city was the site of the gigantic American Shipbuilding yard which produced hundreds of ships from its opening in the 1890s to 1983, when it closed. US Steel also had a works in the southern part of the city, and in the 1950s, Ford opened a plant in Lorain.

Morrison was a precocious student who learned to read at an early age and was asked to help other students with their schoolwork throughout high school. In these years she absorbed works by Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy and George Eliot. She was one of the few black students in her high school graduating class.

She then attended historically black Howard University in Washington, DC and graduated in 1953 with a degree in English. It was in Washington, DC that she first encountered the wholesale segregation of restaurants and public facilities.

Morrison did graduate work at Cornell University, writing a master's thesis on "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's treatment of the alienated." She taught English at Texas Southern University in Houston and for several years at Howard. By 1967, she was a senior fiction editor for Random House in New York.

She published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970 at the age of 39. It concerns a young black girl during the Depression and the Second World War in Lorain who is looking for acceptance and is sexually abused by her father. The girl, Pecola, can only find standards of beauty and affirmation in the blue eyes of some white people, an unobtainable goal for her.

The Bluest Eye has powerful passages about the lot of black women in the South: "Squatting in a cane field, stopping in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank, they had carried a world on their heads. They had given over the lives of their own children and tendered their grandchildren. With

relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain."

This turn to the segregated and deeply oppressive past in memory and experience became characteristic of Morrison's fiction. As a rule, she set most of her work before the Civil Rights movement and the transformations of American life in the 1960s. The weight of slavery, Jim Crow and poverty and discrimination in the North are the ballast of much of what she wrote.

Her second novel, *Sula* (1973), for example, takes place in a largely black neighborhood in a segregated Northern city. The book focuses on two friends, Nell and Sula, and their diverging lives. Sula is a non-conformist living an "experimental" life of relative sexual freedom, for which she is scorned.

Song of Solomon (1977) brought Morrison to the attention of a broader audience. The story concerns Milkman, the son of a real estate owner who grows up from the postwar period to the 1960s in an unnamed Michigan city.

The crises and complications of the novel concern mostly his family, who are wealthy by the standards of the community in which they live. As a boy, he meets his unconventional aunt, Pilate—a wonderfully drawn character who is rude, tough, unimpressed by the opinions of others. Some of the scenes are poignant. News comes on the radio in a barbershop of the murder and mutilation in Mississippi of Emmett Till in 1955 and the patrons and workers react in anger and horror.

"The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they'd witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor."

A close friend of Milkman's becomes an anti-white terrorist, belonging to a secret society that conducts, implausibly, tit-for-tat retribution for murders of blacks. There is an element of fantasy in Morrison's work that does not always convince. Why not make him a recruit for the Nation of Islam or a supporter of Marcus Garvey? At any rate, Milkman scorns his friend's choice, but he has no real politics of his own.

Milkman visits the South literally searching for gold and resolves mysteries about his family—not all of whom are black. He discovers the legacy of murder of his grandfather by whites who wanted his land. While here, as in the North, he is not the direct recipient of racism, but encounters the pervasive poverty of blacks in the South and their hostility to his imperious attitude, fine clothes and car.

Artistically, some characters' motivations are not always fleshed out in *Song of Solomon*. But the book provides a sense of what life was like for blacks in the North and the South in the period immediately leading up to the Civil Rights movement.

Morrison's most compelling work is *Beloved* (1987), that remained on the best-seller list for 25 weeks. It takes place on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio in 1873 in a family headed by a woman, Sethe, who suffered horribly on a plantation called Sweet Home in Kentucky. Sethe escaped from the plantation and was hunted down under the Fugitive Slave Act. The novel is based on an actual event. Rather than return her infant child to slavery, Sethe cuts her throat, and is imprisoned rather than sent back to Sweet Home.

Years later, her house is haunted by the baby's ghost, a phenomenon that has driven Sethe's two sons out of the house. She lives with her daughter Denver, who is unable to leave the house. Sethe and Denver are isolated from the rest of the community and only come to life when old friends return and stir up the memories of the past. Soon, the dead child manifests itself (or so the characters believe) as a young woman who comes to live with Sethe and Denver.

This is a typically lyrical passage: "Denver's secrets were sweet. Accompanied every time by wild veronica until she discovered cologne. The first bottle was a gift, the next she stole from her mother and hid among boxwood until it froze and cracked. That was the year winter came in a hurry at suppertime and stayed eight months. One of the War years when Miss Bodwin, the whitewoman, brought Christmas cologne for her mother and herself, oranges for the boys and another good wool shawl for Baby Suggs. Talking of a war full of dead people, she looked happy—flush-faced, and although her voice was heavy as a man's, she smelled like a roomful of flowers—excitement that Denver could have all for herself in the boxwood. Back beyond 124 was a narrow field that stopped itself at a wood. On the yonder side of these woods, a stream. In these woods, between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves."

Beloved is a novel of blood, hunger, disease, suffering and oppression, but there is a triumph of love among Sethe and her friends and family, who represented the most oppressed layers of American society. The novel is often insightful into the nature of intimate feeling. Toward the very end of the book, one character remembers what a fellow slave said about a woman he loved:

"She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order. It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind."

The novel (and this is often the case in Morrison's work) mixes the speech of the African-American poor with the poetic insight of the narrator's: "Circling, circling, now she was gnawing on something else instead of getting to the point."

Beloved is a serious book about a serious subject. Again, to her credit, Morrison is dealing with the most oppressed of the oppressed in American society. That social fact provides the author with a good deal of her impetus. How many novels have treated former slaves, their thoughts and feelings? Many changes had to take place in society before this was possible.

So, *Beloved* is a genuine advance from one point of view. One is even prepared to forgive the over-abundant "magical realism." The critic James Wood suggested that Morrison was too often "so besotted with making poetry, with the lyrical dyeing of every moment, that she cannot grant characters their own words. She is in love with words, and it is too bad if these words coincide somewhat awkwardly with the words of her characters." This may be true, but the story in *Beloved* is sufficiently horrifying and fascinating to outweigh this problem for the most part.

But there are issues. First, it is not honest or at least *complete* to deal with African-American life in 1873 and treat the Civil War as a virtual non-event. And this is related to the second problem, the tendency to treat suffering from a largely racial and exclusivist angle. This is not stated

a explicitly, ~~critically~~ hovers in the ~~air~~ *cais* in *Beloved*.

One has the feeling at times that Morrison's poetical myth-making, as appealing as it can be, also has the function of covering over an important fact: as opposed to left-wing black authors of a previous generation, she is separating African-American hardship and misery from the general conditions of the oppressed. Her concentration is on what makes black suffering in America *unique*, whereas a figure such as Richard Wright (*Native Son*), writing under the influence of the October Revolution, could explain about his discovery of left-wing politics in the early 1930s: "My attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole."

This was an objective problem. Morrison came along during a period of ideological stagnation, the waning influence of socialism in the intelligentsia and, specifically, the collapse of the Civil Rights movement and the decline in mass struggle. Her rise as a novelist coincides with the first period of racial quotas under various state and federal affirmative action policies. As a public figure, Morrison came to express the aspirations of the black upper middle class.

In a 1972 book review of a biography of Communist Party leader Angela Davis, she refers to the author as a "simpatico white girl who felt she was privy to the secret of how black revolutionaries got that way." Leaving aside the fact that Davis, an inveterate Stalinist, was no "revolutionary," getting to know how anyone "got that way" is complex. Some "inside knowledge," so to speak, may help. After all, Tolstoy didn't write about the Chinese. African-Americans may have particular insights, but blacks and whites ought to be able to write about each other with intelligence and sensitivity.

This exclusivism combined with an outlook that also advocated privileges for upper-middle-class women. In a 1979 speech to the graduating class of the elite Barnard College in New York, she preached a kind of noblesse oblige to those women, who will "take your place in the world and decide who shall flourish and who shall wither."

In 1988, after Morrison did not receive the National Book Award for *Beloved*, 48 black writers and intellectuals signed a statement in the *New York Times* that reprimanded the publishing industry for overlooking her. That year, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for the work. Her place in the literary establishment was ensured when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Morrison carried identity politics into her understanding of literature. For her, American literature not only had a racial component but was defined by it. "For the most part," she says in a 1991 essay, "literature in the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a new white man." She argued here and elsewhere that the presence of the African American was ubiquitous in American novels, poetry and drama, whether blacks appeared as characters or not.

It is difficult to say what impact this outlook had on her fiction. Certainly, as we have suggested, it had some. The black people she writes about are almost hermetically sealed from the larger historical processes. *Song of Solomon* gives no indication of a developing Civil Rights movement. In the novel, one character in the South speaks of the "hopelessness of doing anything" and no matter how many people felt this way in the 1950s, an author writing in 1977 surely knew great storms were brewing.

Beloved takes place in 1873, but harks back to the horrors of plantation life. While that may be the most necessary emotion for Sethe and the others, the struggles by blacks (and whites) during the entire Reconstruction period do not make an impact on the consciousness of any of the characters in the novel.

Toward the end of her life, Morrison's views became the mainstream. Race and gender have become the name of the game in the arts as well as all aspects of official politics and culture. She enlarged her public profile

after the billionaire television talk show host Oprah Winfrey featured her books in her book club. Morrison's novels sold by the millions, making her a very wealthy woman.

In a 2015 interview she said, "I'm writing for black people in the same way that Tolstoy was not writing for me, a 14-year old colored girl in Lorain, Ohio." This is doubly ironic and doubly false, given that millions of her readers were white, and that, like Tolstoy, she created work that attempted to define not only the affairs of one people or even one class, but the human condition for a historical epoch. Further, it is unlikely that the tradition of American literature that Morrison wrote for and within would have been possible without the works of Tolstoy and other giants.

By the end of her life, her utterances could be reactionary and crude. One thing she wanted to see, she said in 2015, "a white kid shot in the back by a cop. Never happened." It happens all the time, in fact.

She was, predictably, an ardent supporter of Barack Obama, who awarded her the Medal of Freedom in 2012. In 2016 she supported Hillary Clinton in the presidential elections.

None of that, however, should detract from her accomplishment, in her earlier and best work, of giving artistic life to the thoughts and feelings of layers of the black population from the 19th to the mid-20th century.



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