



Voices from the Gaps

Toni Morrison

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You think I don't know what your life is like just because I ain't living it? I know what ever colored woman in this country is doing." "What's that?" "Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world." "Really? What have you got to show for it?" "Show? To Who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me." "Lonely, ain't it?" "Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely

— Sula

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1931
- * African-American author and playwright
- * Won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 for *Beloved*

Biography

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford, the second of four children, to George and Ramah Wofford on February 18, 1931. Both of her parents came from sharecropping families who had moved North in pursuit of better living conditions in the early 1900s, and her father's family had faced a great deal of discrimination. Due to these bitter memories and the racial troubles he endured during his childhood, he maintained a strong distrust of whites throughout his lifetime.

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Morrison's parents instilled the value of group loyalty, which they believed was essential to surviving the harsh realities of racial tension during that era. As an African-American in a town of immigrants, she grew up with the notion that the only place she could turn to for aid and reassurance would be within her own community in Lorain, Ohio. Here, Morrison had "an escape from stereotyped black settings -- neither plantation nor ghetto."

She grew up in a lively household and was surrounded by songs, fairy tales, ghost stories, myths, music, and the language of their African-American heritage. A common practice in her family was storytelling; after the adults had shared their stories, the children told their own. The importance of both listening to stories and creating them contributed to Morrison's profound love of reading.

Morrison's parents encouraged her passion for reading, learning, and culture, as well as a confidence in her own abilities and attributes as woman. They educated Morrison before she was sent to school, and as an adolescent she became enthralled by classic literature, including Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy. In an interview with Jean Strouse, Morrison described her childhood experiences with literature: "Those books were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio, but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway -- they spoke directly to me out of their own specificity." Morrison was especially impressed by the ability of her favorite authors to identify with and present their own cultural roots.

Morrison graduated high school with honors in 1949 and went on to attend Howard University in Washington D.C. It was during this time that Morrison changed her name from "Chloe" to "Toni," (derived from her middle name, Anthony) so that her name would be easier to pronounce. Morrison was also a member of the Howard Repertory Theatre; their trips to perform gave her the opportunity to observe the African-American experience in the South. In 1953, she graduated from Howard University with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in Classics. Morrison went on to pursue graduate studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In 1955, she completed her master's thesis on the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner and received a Master of Arts.



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Following her graduation, Morrison began her teaching career at Texas Southern University. She returned to Howard in 1957 as an English instructor and began working on her own writing. There she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect and fellow faculty member. The couple had two sons: Harold Ford and Slade Morrison.

During this period, Morrison joined a small writer's group as a temporary escape from an unhappy marriage. She needed to be around people who appreciated literature as much as she did. For discussion, each member was required to bring a story or poem. After one week, Morrison had brought nothing so she quickly wrote a story based on a girl she knew during childhood who had prayed to God for blue eyes. Although her group enjoyed the story, Morrison put it away, thinking she was done with it. Over that same period the marriage deteriorated, culminating in divorce in 1964. After her divorce, Morrison left Howard University and began working as an associate editor for Random House in Syracuse, New York.

While working during the day, her housekeeper took care of her two sons. In the evening, Morrison cooked dinner and played with her sons until their bedtime, when she would start writing. She found writing exciting and challenging; she found everything else boring by comparison with the exception of parenting. In an interview with Nellie McKay, when asked how she manages these responsibilities, her response was, "Well, I really only do two things... It only looks like many things. All of my work has to do with books. It's all one thing. And the other thing that I do is to raise my children which, as you know, I can only do one minute at a time" (McKay 140). In 1967, she was transferred to New York where she became a senior editor for Random House.

It was during this time when Morrison began to develop the story she had presented at her literature group. For several years, she tried to get the novel published, but after many rejections, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston accepted *The Bluest Eye* for publication in 1970. From 1971-1972, Morrison became the associate professor of English at the State University of New York while continuing her job at Random House. During this time, Morrison mentored African-American women writers, including Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones and compiled and anthologized the works and histories of African-Americans. She also spent her spare time writing her second novel, *Sula*, a story focused on a friendship between two adult black women. It was published in 1973 and was nominated for the 1975 National Book Award in fiction.



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Sula is the story of two women from a poor African-American community called 'the Bottom' in Ohio. Nel is the only daughter of Helene Wright, a socially conscious and conservative woman. Sula is the only daughter of Hannah Peace and lives in a large and mysterious house with her grandmother Eva Peace. Nel comes from a very restrictive household whereas Sula is raised not so much with a sense of freedom as without boundaries. Her mother has had relations with many of the men in the Bottom and is considered to be quite beautiful. This seems to influence Sula's sense of freewill and spirit later in the novel. Nel and Sula become fast friends and are inseparable through much of their childhood. Helene is initially apprehensive of her daughter's friendship with Sula because of her mother's reputation. However, Sula is a polite houseguest and Helene easily dismisses her fears. Each child prefers the others' home to their own because of the significant difference in atmosphere.

After high school, Nel and Sula's paths diverge and do not intersect for another ten years. Nel stays in the Bottom and marries Jude Greene, a waiter at the local hotel and a member of the church choir. Sula leaves the Bottom and goes off to college, and like her mother, has many affairs with men. When she returns to the Bottom, she and Nel immediately pick up where they left off. However, Sula and Jude have an affair and Nel walks in on them. This incident ends the friendship between Sula and Nel, as well as the marriage of Nel and Jude. After Jude leaves her, Nel raises her two children alone, and has no communication with Sula for three years. The next time they speak is when Sula has become very sick and is near death. The novel takes a more explicitly philosophical turn as the two friends have their final conversation about what it means to be good or bad and how one knows the difference. Sula dies soon after this conversation and is buried in the town cemetery. In the final scene of the novel, Nel visits Sula's grandmother, Eva, in a nursing home. Eva is quite old and appears to be forgetful of the memories Nel seeks to retell. Saddened by her conversation with Eva, Nel walks home; she finds herself at the town cemetery and realizes that she misses Sula, her one and only friend. This novel focuses mainly on the struggles of womanhood as faced by African-American women within their own communities and white communities as well. Morrison also concerns herself with what it means to be good and bad and how these very concepts are indefinable. The final scene between Nel and Sula is both touching and sad, as both come to question the other's opinion and knowledge.



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Morrison also introduces several characters and scenes which challenge the reader's sense of good and evil, especially the scene in which Chicken Little (a young boy who lives in the Bottom) is climbing a tree with the help of Sula and then falls into the river and dies. Nel and Sula do not know what to do, and neither one tells anyone what has happened. Definitions of good and evil are also challenged when Eva struggles to survive as a woman on her own with three children. Eva made many sacrifices and was able to sustain her family; however, later on in the novel she kills her own son after he returns from war with an addiction to drugs. The novel also questions American society as well as the choices made by those who live in it. After all is said and done, is it necessary for one to defend one's actions? What is the point of a life lived for anyone else? Are sacrifices important to lead a 'good and true life'? *Sula* raises these questions through the examination of two women who live out their own unique idea of a just life.

The article, "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: a Satire on Binary Thinking" by Rita A. Bergenholtz argues that Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* should be considered a novel in the tradition of satire. Bergenholtz begins by stating that *Sula* has been read in a variety of different contexts as a "black woman's epic, a study of 'female friendship', an 'antiwar novel,' a 'fable,' and an exploration of the 'feminine psyche'" (Bergenholtz 1). However, in selecting one definition against others, it becomes clear that Morrison's novel is indeed written with the sense of binary in mind, which, Bergenholtz argues, is what Morrison's novel is "about."

According to Bergenholtz, *Sula* should be read as a satire because Morrison is successful in causing the reader not only to rethink common societal problems, but also to reach a sense of catharsis in the process. The novel is engaging and humorous, as well as extremely tragic. One feels almost torn between these two opposing emotions and unsure of how to categorize the novel, which is exactly how Bergenholtz begins her argument. Bergenholtz continues by mentioning the theme of binary oppositions in the novel, most evident in the beginning of the novel in which Morrison begins with a joke about the town being named the "Bottom" even though it is on top of a mountain. Bergenholtz briefly analyzes each character to show that Morrison uses binaries in their descriptions and actions. Satire is a genre which is well paired with the notion of binary since satire, generally, is a subtle critique of accepted norms and mores.



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Bergenholtz makes a strong case for the number of opposites that appear throughout the novel. One of the novel's central themes of good and evil (the problem of dissociating one from the other) is also a compelling argument in her favor since good and evil are binaries. Nevertheless, despite this evidence, one can't help but take a somewhat existentialist view of the novel. Given the complex nature of good and evil, it seems unlikely that Morrison is seeking a strict definition of either term. This is reflected in the complexity of the characters found in the novel, whose human flaws and various decisions defy categorization as merely good or evil. Just as the "Bottom" is actually the top of the mountain but, as white people begin to move to it, it becomes the "top"; these arbitrary definitions and terms seem to prove only that language is an imprecise tool at best, which lacks the ability to objectively define these abstract concepts. Bergenholtz does mention the difficulty with language towards the end of her argument; however, this brief passage begins what could be a much larger discussion, which is unrealized. Indeed, the end of the novel seems to be the most compelling evidence for the inability to truly understand human actions and justify right against wrong, as Nel breaks down and cries after the death of Sula. Despite the fact that Nel and Sula are "binary characters" who think and have opposing actions, Morrison concludes her novel with the sadness of the loss of the seemingly "amoral character" as viewed by the morally strong-willed character, Nel.

The publication of these first novels opened up new pathways for Morrison and encouraged her to write even more. From 1976-1977, she was a visiting lecturer at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, while also writing her third novel, *Song of Solomon*. Unlike *Sula*, this novel would focus on strong male characters, an interest she developed while watching her two sons start to grow up. This third novel was published in 1977 and won both the National Book Critic's Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award. President Jimmy Carter nominated Morrison to the National Council on the Arts. By 1981, she published her fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, where she explored the interaction between black and white society.

After working at Random House for almost twenty years, Morrison left her position there in 1983. She was named the Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York in Albany in 1984. While living in Albany, she started writing her first play, "Dreaming Emmett." It was based on the true story of a black teenager, Emmett Till, killed by racist whites in 1955 after being accused of whistling at a white woman. The play's first performance opened on January 4, 1986 at the Marketplace Theater in Albany. Soon after, she began work on her fifth novel, *Beloved*.



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“Because slave life had ‘busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,’ she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart—which she put to work at once” (*Beloved*, 102).

Published in 1987, *Beloved* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988, adapted for film in 1998, and remains one of Toni Morrison’s most well-known and critically-acclaimed works. It was influenced by a published story about a slave, Margaret Garner, who in 1851 escaped with her children to Ohio from her master in Kentucky. Not only does it expose the atrocities and depravities of the institution of slavery in the tradition of slave narratives that have come before it, but the novel also shows the powerful hold that this past has on slaves even after they have won their freedom. *Beloved* is a novel replete with ghosts, not only in the guise of its title character, but also in the ghostly memories of enslavement that still haunt Sethe and Paul D. The plot of the novel is somewhat disjointed, as the story moves through the narratives of various characters at different points in their history; the central plot unfolds at 124 in Cincinnati, and a smattering of chapters are devoted to abstract monologues. In part, the novel provides a chronicle of Sethe’s struggle to escape the slave farm at Sweet Home and live in freedom with her children, ending tragically with the death of her youngest daughter when she is rediscovered by her former master. In a similar fashion, Paul D’s story begins at Sweet Home and follows his escape, capture, and imprisonment on a chain gang in Georgia. Paul D, Sethe, her daughter Denver, and the ghostly Beloved all converge in the present while the characters each try to come to terms with their pasts.

While the text covers a wide variety of themes and topics, perhaps the most moving representation of these is found in maternity. Two of the novel’s most disturbing scenes expose both the depravity and violence of slavery and what is debatably a powerful act of love. The first is a violent sexual assault perpetrated against Sethe while at the ironically named “Sweet Home”, when the master’s sons attack her in the barn. The sexual assault and violation are depraved in and of themselves, but the situation is made even more perverse when they subvert Sethe’s role as a mother by stealing the milk from her breasts. This act in particular haunts Sethe the most, because they took one of the few things she still had to give her children. This violation makes her even more determined to be a mother to her children, while giving a graphic image of the ways that slavery disrupted and destroyed the bond between mothers and their children.



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Similarly, the arrival of Sethe's former masters to come and reclaim her after she has escaped to freedom forces her to action. Unable to accept a fate of slavery for her children after experiencing it firsthand, at the first sight of the schoolteacher Sethe grabs her children and attempts to euthanize them. She cuts the throat of her two-year-old daughter with a handsaw before she is stopped by the authorities, and while this may shock the reader, the perverse nature of her reality made this a tragic but arguably loving gesture from a mother to her child. In Sethe's mind, freedom in death was a better fate for her children than a life spent in slavery, and her belief was so resolute that she followed through to the point of murder. The intense suffering that Sethe endures as she struggles with the death of her child establishes the act clearly as one of love; she is acting on behalf of her child, despite the pain it causes her personally.

In Peggy Ochoa's work of literary criticism "Morrison's *Beloved*: Allegorically Othering "White" Christianity," she explores some of the other relationships found in the novel, and approaches the text as an interpretation of biblical allegory. Ochoa argues that groups classified as "other" are marginalized, and as a result their discourse is created unchecked, at the fringes of society. By necessity, this "other-speech" contains hidden meanings that go beyond literal interpretations and with this in mind Ochoa makes several claims regarding *Beloved* and its relationship to traditional views of the Bible.

The first of these claims revolve around the novel's opening epigraph of "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." In the New Testament passage where the quote is found, the relationship is between God and Gentiles who became Christians, and Ochoa also recognizes Morrison's use of the passage as an allusion to the new offer of acceptance from white Christian society to previously enslaved blacks. She further argues that, in the same way that early Christians faced animosity from some Jews that would not accept them, freed blacks were forced to "set up their own type of worship services separate from white society and the organized white Christian church" (Ochoa, 111). This can be found in the text during the outdoor prayer meetings and rituals conducted by Baby Suggs. This allusion to tensions between Jews and Gentiles is one of many that can be created from this initial epigraph, another can be found in the Old Testament passage which it echoes.



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In the Old Testament book of Hosea a similar quotation can be found, but in this context the relationship is between “the Jews [who] were estranged from their God after being closely identified as ‘His chosen people,’” who are likened to a rejected woman who will be reunited to her husband (112). As is the case with many stories of biblical redemption and freedom (such as the exodus from Egypt), the relationship established in this passage can also be related to the persecution and hope for love and acceptance that African-Americans face throughout the novel. Furthermore, Ochoa uses this relationship to claim *Beloved* is an “allegorical revision of the Song of Solomon” (112).

Interestingly, while many theologians interpret the relationship between Solomon and his beloved as a parallel for the relationship between Christ and the Church, little attention is given to the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba, completely ignoring “the fact that a black woman is the most prominent Biblical representation of the bride of Christ” (113). This apparent ignorance only serves to strengthen the mistaken belief that black women cannot be looked upon as beautiful, a myth that Morrison serves to dispel both by alluding to the Song of Solomon and in her representations of Sethe and especially *Beloved* in the novel. Similarly, both the characters in the novel and the Queen of Sheba are separated from love by outside authorities: the “watchmen” from the biblical passage, the slaveholders who murder Halle, and the schoolteacher who finally corners Sethe and forces her to kill her own child, *Beloved*. These interpretations of *Beloved* only begin to explore the richness of the text, and it has become a landmark in Morrison’s career.

Since 1988, Morrison has held the Robert F. Goheen Professorship of the Humanities at Princeton University and became the first black woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League University. She was also the Chair of their Creative Writing Program until May 2006. She began writing her sixth novel, *Jazz*, which was about life in the 1920’s and was published in 1992. In 1993, Morrison was the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature as recognition for her already impressive body of work. She continued to write, and in 1999 published her next novel, *Paradise*, which takes place in an all-black town called Ruby, and describes a violent attack that a group of men make on a small, all-female community at the edge of town. In 2003 she published *Love*, describing life and love during the 1940’s and 1950’s on a black seaside resort. However, in recent years Morrison has broken away from her traditional work as a novelist and has been publishing several young children’s books with her son, Slade Morrison.



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Published in 2002, the book was inspired by stories that Slade Morrison imagined as a child. It is about three children who have been placed in a “box” because the adults in their lives have gone too far in protecting the children. They have placed rules and regulations around what each child can and cannot do. But all the children just want to be themselves. In the end, each child is able to break out of their “boxes” and have a little freedom.

This book is a little threatening to parents because of their representation in the story. While each set of adults tries to give the children everything they could possibly want, they will not give them their freedom. Although the children in the book try to be good, they do not have their own lives and their own experiences. This is the main concern that most parents have with the book and a common source of criticism. Morrison is not saying that parents should not be strict with their children but that parents should let their children explore sometimes because that is one way to learn. Teaching at Princeton, Morrison has seen adult children who are in college but only work to succeed because it has been instilled in them by their parents. When these students fail, it is much harder for them to get back up because they have been carrying an expectation of success throughout their lives. Though this book is written for children 8 years and younger, it is definitely a book to which adolescents can relate.

While Toni Morrison has led an influential life of her own, two people influenced her outlook on the world a great deal. First, her grandmother, who left her home in the South with seven children at the age of thirty, in fear of sexual violence against her maturing daughters, and second her mother, who worked “embarrassing jobs” in order to help Morrison go through college and graduate (McKay 138). Over the course of her career, Toni Morrison has become a major twentieth century literary figure and a strong role model in her own right to other women writers. She is also a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters as well as an active member in the National Council on the Arts (McKay 140).

In Morrison’s interview with McKay, she explained that her writing process begins with an idea, and then a search for characters will fit the characteristics of the idea, whether they are children or adults, men or women. While giving a lecture at Princeton, Morrison was asked by a student “who she wrote for”. She swiftly replied, “I want to write for people like me, which is to say black people, curious people, demanding people -- people who can’t be faked, people who don’t need to be patronized, people who have very, very high criteria.”



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She usually likes to start with the beginning and the end of the story and then fill in the middle after those two parts have been completed (McKay 143). Morrison likes to manipulate her stories and leave her readers with lasting thoughts on her books and novels. When her readers stop and reflect she knows that she has accomplished her task as a writer: “I don’t want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about, and I hope that I set it up in such a way that it is a legitimate thing, and a valuable thing” (McKay 147). Morrison also tries to find a relationship between literary criticism and black writers. These critiques and studies enable black literature to be heard how it is supposed to be heard, and establish a cultural and academic dialogue that keeps black writers from being marginalized. She believes that black people have a rich culture of storytelling to draw upon and that their stories must be heard.



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