

Chloe Ardelia Anthony Wofford aka Toni Morrison:

(February 18, 1931 to August 9, 2019: Nobel Laureate; Pulitzer Prize winning Novelist; Editor; Academic; and Playwright)

“I never asked Tolstoy to write for me, a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio. I never asked [James] Joyce not to mention Catholicism or the world of Dublin. Never. And I don't know why I should be asked to explain your life to you. We have splendid writers to do that, but I am not one of them. It is that business of being universal, a word hopelessly stripped of meaning for me. Faulkner wrote what I suppose could be called regional literature and had it published all over the world. That's what I wish to do. If I tried to write a universal novel, it would be water. Behind this question is the suggestion that to write for Black people is somehow to diminish the writing. From my perspective there are only Black people. When I say 'people,' that's what I mean.”

Chloe Ardelia Anthony Wofford aka Toni Morrison unquestionably belongs amongst the pantheon of great American novelists. Her primary objective was to tell the stories that she wanted to read about Black people. Throughout the course of her storied career and life, Morrison repeatedly resisted the overt pressure to incorporate white characters or to appeal to white audiences; what she called the white gaze.

Over the course of at least 11 novels, Morrison solely focused on the voices of Black people. If there were white characters in her work, they were minor at best, for which Morrison was unapologetic. During the course of her career, she would insist that Black literature was an artform worthy of respect in its own right: “Black literature is taught as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form.”

Morrison also refused to conform to conventional labels. For example, she resisted being called a Black feminist:

“Womanists, is what Black feminists used to call themselves. They were not the same thing. And also the relationship with man. Historically, Black women have always sheltered their men, because they were not out there and they were the ones that were most likely to be killed.”

Born on February 18, 1931, Morrison was the second of four children. Her mother: Ramah Willis was born in Alabama. Willis was a homemaker and a devout Christian. Her father: George Wofford, was born in Cartersville Georgia. The head of his household, Wofford worked as a welder.

A lynching would play a pivotal role in the fate of the Wofford family. A 15 year old George Wofford would see the bodies of two Black businessmen who had been lynched by a mob of

angry whites. Maybe fear or presaging a similar fate for himself, Wofford would leave Cartersville. In the 2019 documentary on her life, Morrison claimed that the sight of their bodies contributed to her father's intense hatred of white people thereafter. She recalled vividly, that her father's hatred for white people was so intense that he would not let them in his home.

Tragedy would again occur for the Wofford family when Morrison was two years old. Unable to pay their rent, the white landlord burned down the building they lived in while they were inside. George and Ramah Wofford would laugh about the eviction by fire. The Wofford family would learn a valuable lesson from this incident: that you can keep your integrity and claim your own life in the face of "acts of monumental crudeness."

Two people would prove integral to Morrison's initial love of the word and reading. The first would be her grandfather. Reading was illegal for Blacks when both her mother and grandfather came of age. So much so, that the town where they lived did not have any schools.

Resourceful, in spite of the absence of these resources, her grandfather learned to read. He would proudly boast to her that he had read the Bible five times over, from cover to cover. Initially, her grandfather's pride in this feat perplexed Morrison. She would later learn that this was the only book he had and was allowed to read. Morrison would recall: "I read all of the time. My mother and my grandparents were eager that I keep that up. They came from a place where there was no schools... It was a precious thing and they were proud of it.

At the age of 3, a precocious Morrison would learn to read from her sister. Literacy rates in the town where she lived were low amongst both white and Black residents. Her ability to read thereby allowed her to resist the typical badge of inferiority that many Blacks bore at the time.

Interesting Fact: At 12, Morrison became a Catholic. Her baptized name was, Anthony, after Saint Anthony of Padua. In college, she adopted the nickname Toni; it would be the name that the world would come to know her by.

Interesting Fact: Morrison had wanted to publish under her maiden name, Toni Wofford. However, her publisher went to press before she could stop them from publishing under the moniker the world would grow to know her by: Toni Morrison.

In 1949, Morrison would enroll at Howard University as a drama major. Her love of prose and the word would ultimately prevail, by the time she graduated she would major in English and minor in Classics. Upon obtaining her degree, she would move to New York, where she would begin her literary career.

In 1953, she would begin to work with Alain Locke and Sterling Brown, luminaries in the Harlem Renaissance. Two years later, she would obtain her Masters in American Literature from Cornell. Her thesis would prove telling about her ideological perspective: Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated." It was her belief that if these authors were

not obligated to have Black characters in their work, then she should also not be obligated to have whites in hers.

While teaching at Howard, in 1957, Morrison would marry Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. In 1961, she would have their first son, Harold Ford. In 1963, the family would travel throughout Europe. During these travels, Morrison would become pregnant with her second son Slade. The couple would split after this trip: Morrison would return to the states; and Howard Sr., would return to Jamaica. The two would officially divorce in 1964; Morrison would face the challenges of pursuing a career as a single mother while raising two young boys.

Stressed and unhappy Morrison recalled that she was lonely. Fearful that she would move again, she would not allow herself to make friends. Unable to fill the idleness after she put her children to bed, she began to write. Reflective, she quipped, that lonely unhappy children read to distract themselves from their painful childhoods.

When asked how she managed being a single mother and her career, Morrison laughed that she relied on her family. Morrison initially took various jobs in academia and publishing. From 1955 to 1957 she would teach at Texas Southern University. From 1957 to 1964, she would teach at her alma mater, Howard University.

Interesting Fact: Morrison reflected that the lonely nights she experienced at Howard, afforded her the opportunity to develop the short story that she would later develop into her first novel: "The Bluest Eye."

1964 bore witness to Morrison making the transition into the world of publishing. It was the midst of the civil rights movement, and while at Random House she resolved: "I am not on the street marching, what can I do where I am?" Her response, was to use her time at Random House, to introduce Black writers from all over the world to the mainstream, including but not limited to Chinua Achebe, Angela Davis and Huey Newton. Morrison's prowess as an editor would inevitably become evident. In 1967, she would become the first Black senior editor at Random House.

After introducing scores of other Black authors and intellectuals to American readers, in 1970, at the age of 39, she converted "The Bluest Eye," from a short story into a novel.

Interesting Fact: The inspiration for "The Bluest Eye" came from a conversation Morrison had with a classmate in elementary school. The classmate longed to be white, because she saw the disadvantages of being Black and having dark skin. The conversation stayed with Morrison for years to come, she wanted to explore her classmate's pain in grappling with mainstream beauty standards.

In the Bluest Eye, Morrison sought to confront the tropes of how Black girls were depicted in literature, she wanted to pose profound questions about their views of themselves:

“Every book I read about yellow and black girls , they were props, jokes. Topsy, no one took them seriously ever. I wanted to read a book about that and nobody was writing about that. Even when I wrote the “Bluest Eye,” I was writing a book that I wanted to read. How does a child learn self-loathing, where does it come from? Who teaches them? Who enables them? What are its consequences?”

Pecola Breedlove, the book’s protagonist, was the vessel Morrison created to explore these questions and topics. The novel is told thru the eyes of Breedlove, a young girl who becomes obsessed with white standards of beauty. After being ostracized by her lighter complexioned family members, she prays to God that he would make her eyes blue. When he doesn’t, Breedlove sadly posits that there isn’t a God; she bitterly laments the fact that her eyes remain Black.

The Bluest Eye’s taboo subject matters of incest, rape and teenage pregnancy placed the book at the center of controversy. For Morrison, this was by design: “I started my career with the “Bluest Eye” by putting the entire plot on the first page. It opens describing the protagonist, Pecola, having her father’s child.” In so doing, Morrison sought to give the reader the option up front of whether they would read further. The illicit incestuous sub-plot would point to a more profound and substantive source of Pecola’s pain; challenging whether colorism was the actual impetus for her wanting to be something or someone else.

The book would turn the literary world on its head. By way of powerful prose and provocative questions, it would force the Black community to confront painful truths involving sexual abuse within many of their families. Her first major novel, “The Bluest Eye,” would go on to win the National Book Critics Award.

The 70s were a prolific time for Morrison. She wrote “Sula” in 1973, and that was published in 1975. “Sula,” explored the complicated friendship between two Black women. A provocative work for the times, it addressed the topics of infidelity, betrayal and homosexuality in the friendship dynamic between two Black women.

In 1974, “The Black Book” was published. Extensively researched, Morrison created an anthology of photographs, Negro memorabilia, art and sheet music, essays and documents that depicted Black life in the United States from slavery until the 1920s. The Black Book was considered radical because it did not contextualize Blackness. It did not provide any further explanation to its contents, it just was.

Sonia Sanchez explained that “The Black Book:” “ [was] the mumble jumble that is Black American life. It is everything, it is a jumble of American life, it is everything before there was an African American museum, here it is. It is a study of the emotional and survival aspects of blackness, it reminds me of who I am.” A further testament to the significance and timelessness of the book, is the posthumous recognition it has received almost fifty years later.

Devastated by the death her father, Morrison avoided going back to Lorain for at least three years. The product of that grief was “The Song of Solomon,” which was published in 1977. The subject matter was also a bit different, it was the first time she would write from the Black male perspective.

Literary critics observed that Morrison’s canvas was expanding. She attributed the growth to her father. Grappling with grief, she would say that her father was her inside voice, and that he had helped her write the book. Songs of Solomon explores the story of Macon “Milkman” Dead III from his childhood into adulthood.

Born into a wealthy but emotionally barren family, Milkman sets out on a path of self-discovery. His journey takes him back thru his family’s lineage, where he eventually discovers the legend of his slave ancestor Solomon’s ability to fly. Morrison would later say that this novel led her to view herself as a writer outright.

Morrison’s last novel at Random House was “Tar Baby,” which was published in 1981. Tar Baby revisited the impact of white beauty standards on the psyche of her Black female protagonist. Jadine, a fashion model obsessed with her appearance, falls in love with a penniless grifter who embraces his racial identity. The book posed questions of what truly matters in life; what it true freedom and wealth actually entailed.

Altogether, Morrison would work at Random House for nearly 20 years. During that time, she would make an indelible imprint on world of publishing. In 1983, she left her job at Random House and began teaching and writing at SUNY. From 1986 to 1988, she became a visiting professor at Bard College. Also during this period, she wrote a trilogy of novels: “Beloved;” “Jazz;” and “Paradise.” In 1989, she was hired as a professor at Princeton University. She taught there until 2006.

“Beloved” is considered Morrison’s most important novel. Some attribute its notoriety to Oprah Winfrey otherwise known as the Oprah Effect. Winfrey moved by the book, selected it for her book club. Subsequently, she made and starred in a movie based on the novel. These efforts, not only caused the sale of the book to sky-rocket, it exponentially expanded Morrison’s audience and her acclaim as an author.

A fully dressed woman wearing a hat emerged from a river in front of Morrison’s house. It was this vision, that prompted Morrison to revisit the story of Margaret Garner and write “Beloved.” Riveted by her research on Garner when she wrote “The Black Book” years before, Morrison would revisit the infanticide by way of fiction.

Margaret Garner was born into slavery in Kentucky. In the 1850s, she managed to escape with her four children and crossed the Ohio river. A relentless pursuit ensued; faced with imminent capture, Garner made the decision to kill herself and her children rather than return to the plantation. She slit the throat of one child; wounded two of the others; and would be caught attempting to bash the head in of the fourth.

Garner was ultimately tried for her crimes. What she was charged with would challenge the social mores of the time. Her case presented the judicial system with a provocative question: should she be tried for the murder of her children or for damage to property? To charge Garner with murder and attempted murder would be to acknowledge the humanity of Blacks, of slaves. Something, that at the time, challenged the country's social fabric to its core.

With "Beloved," Morrison wanted to address the absence of the Black woman in slave narratives. Through Sethe, the book's protagonist, Morrison wanted to talk about a woman who had to make some choices, about motherhood, about slavery. In telling the story of Sethe, Morrison wanted to unequivocally convey that she was not a victim. The decision for Garner and Sethe to kill their children was a bold proclamation, that the children were theirs, and that they could do anything that they wanted with them.

"Beloved" is a metaphysical uniquely cathartic deviation from Garner's narrative. 18 years later, the protagonist, Sethe, is confronted by the consequences of her infanticide, Denver. Non-verbal, Denver is torn between loving and wanting to punish her mother. The story is a tale of redemption as told from the vantage point of Sethe. It reminds the reader, that even though a person may do the unthinkable, that they can heal and grow to love again.

"Beloved" was a critical success. It was a best seller for 25 weeks, and in 1988 it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Controversy would surround the book and Morrison, when she won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Months prior to the prize, at least 48 Black writers protested Morrison being snubbed for a different award. Critics claimed that "Beloved" was unworthy of the Nobel Prize, others claimed the book was a "fraud."

The absence of white central or major characters in Morrison's work continued to bedevil her critics. In an interview in 1987, she would counter:

"We've had the first rush of Black entertainment, where Blacks were writing for whites, and whites were encouraging this kind of self-flagellation. Now we can get down to the craft of writing, where Black people are talking to Black people."

The nineties would bear witness to Morrison returning to the theater, this time delving into the world of opera. There would be three works: "Honey and the Rue," which was performed by Kathleen Battle in 1992; "Four Songs," which premiered with Sylvia McNair in 1994; and "Four Songs on Text and Spirits in the Well," which was written for and performed by Jessye Norman in 1997.

Years later, Morrison would revisit her perspective on racism in an interview with Charlie Rose. As a Black woman, Morrison opined that Black people possessed the moral high ground. The interview took place in 1987, and by that time, Morrison was a multi-award winning novelist and academic. Rose nevertheless wanted to know whether she was as affected by race as other Blacks, who may not have reached the same heights in life. Instead, Morrison lamented the neurosis associated with racism:

“The people who do this thing, that practice racism, are bereft, that there is something distorted about the psyche. It is a huge waste, and it is a corruption.... It’s like it’s a profound neurosis that nobody examines. It feels crazy, it is crazy. It has just as much of a deleterious effect on white people, and possibly an equal effect on Black people.”

Morrison continued to be a prolific writer from 2000 to 2015. Some of her notable works during this time were: “Love,” published in 2003; and “A Mercy,” which was published in 2008. During this period, Morrison would also collaborate with her youngest son Slade on a number of children’s books.

Slade would die of pancreatic cancer in 2012. Again stricken with grief, Morrison stopped writing. With time, she was able to get over it by reminding herself that Slade would not want her to stop writing. The product of this epiphany was yet another highly acclaimed work: “Home,” which was published in 2012. She would dedicate this book to her son Slade.

In 2014, Morrison would again address the white gaze and call it, the get whitey literature:”

“White gaze, who’s eyes, who’s language is controlling? Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison [in their writings] were fighting the white oppressor. I could not do that.... There’s a freeness in not having to respond to everyone else’s gaze.” -Discussion at Cornell University in 2014: Toni Morrison on Language, Evil and the White Gaze”

In 2015, Morrison wrote her eleventh and final book: “God Help the Child.” For the final time, Morrison again would revisit the topics of colorism and childhood trauma. In a contemporary setting, “God Help the Child,” would tell the story of Lula Ann Bridewell aka Bride.

Outwardly, Bride appeared to have it altogether. With flawless ebony skin, the beautiful Bride is a successful executive in cosmetics. At first blush, her love life even seemed ideal. Steamy reflections and memories of how he made her feel, upon his abrupt departure, Bride realizes that she did not know much about her lover Booker.

The book follows her quest to find him. In her quest, Bride has epiphanies about herself, as well as the unresolved colorist trauma inflicted by her mother Sweetness. The overarching message of the book was that unresolved intergenerational trauma, unaddressed, arrests development and can prove fatal to the body and spirit.

A life as vast and as accomplished as Morrison's becomes virtually impossible to capture in words. Perhaps Morrison's own words are apropos. In her 1993 acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in Literature, Morrison ruminated on the existential meaning of life and the word itself:

"We die that may be the meaning of life. But we do language, that may be the measure of our lives."

2019 would beckon the sunset to a life well lived. Debilitated by complications associated with pneumonia, Morrison would die at the Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. Morrison's words again may prove best to describe what she meant to those she loved and the world as a whole: "and she was loved." -Song of Solomon.

Notable Works:

- The Bluest Eye, (1970)
- Sula, (1973)
- Song of Solomon, (1977)
- Tar Baby, (1981)
- Beloved, (1987)
- Jazz, (1992)
- Paradise, (1998)
- Love, (2003)
- A Mercy, (2008)
- Home, (2012)
- God Help the Child, (2015)

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