



# Thoughts on the African-American Novel

Literary Criticism by Toni Morrison

### NOTABLE QUOTE

*"The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power."*

### FYI

Did you know that Toni Morrison ...

- was once a textbook editor?
- raised two sons as a single mother after her first marriage ended?
- changed her first name in college because "Chloe" was hard to pronounce?
- was the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in literature?



**Toni Morrison**

born 1931

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. This working-class town had a small, close-knit African-American community with a vibrant oral culture. In stories, songs, and everyday speech, Morrison heard an imaginative blend of biblical phrases, rhetorical devices, slang, and conventional English. This early awareness of the power of language and storytelling was a powerful influence on Morrison's work.

**Accidental Novelist** After earning a bachelor's degree from Howard University (1953) and a master's in English from Cornell University (1955), Morrison embarked on a teaching career. While teaching at Howard, she joined a writers' group for fun, showing up at meetings with what she called "old junk" that she'd written in high school. When she ran out of "junk" before one meeting, she quickly

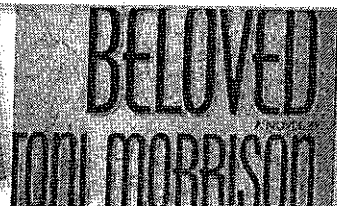
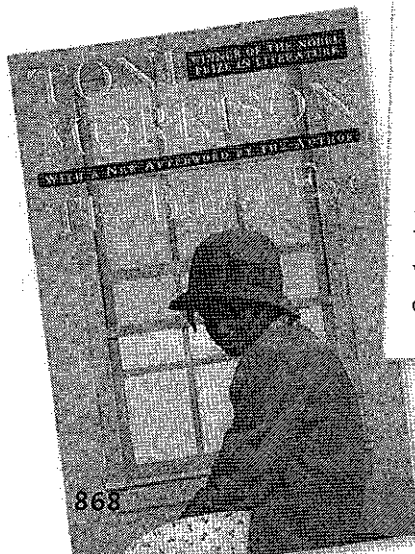
scribbled down a story—a story that later inspired her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Published in 1969, the book recounts the story of a troubled African-American girl who, conditioned by white society's ideals of beauty, longs to have blue eyes. The novel's themes, such as the trauma of racism and the importance of community, set the stage for Morrison's later work.

**A Major Literary Force** The novels *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981) established Morrison as a major author with a unique voice. Her novels typically have richly symbolic plots that include supernatural or fantastic elements. Within this imaginative context, Morrison provides a realistic treatment of social issues. Her characters, who often have allegorical or biblical names, confront the central struggles of African-American life: the impact of violence and injustice on their lives and the search for cultural identity.

Morrison has been nominated for every major literary honor; she has received, among others, the National Book Critics Circle Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the Nobel Prize in Literature. She has written several novels and numerous works of commentary and cultural analysis. More recent novels include *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003). Morrison lectures and teaches at various universities across the country. She is widely considered one of the most innovative stylists in contemporary American literature.

### Author Online

For more on Toni Morrison, visit the Literature Center at [ClassZone.com](http://ClassZone.com).



## LITERARY ANALYSIS: LITERARY CRITICISM

If you've ever read a book review, you're already familiar with **literary criticism**, writing that focuses on literary works, genres, and ideas. Works of literary criticism, which are most often essays or book reviews, are written to make readers more knowledgeable about, and appreciative of, the literature they read. Typically, these works

- describe a specific aspect—such as origins, characteristics, or impact—of a literary work, genre, or idea
- provide a historical or literary context for their subject
- describe standards for measuring the excellence of literary works

As you read, see what features of literary criticism you can identify in this essay.

## READING SKILL: IDENTIFY AUTHOR'S POSITION

Works of literary criticism are written to communicate a position, or an opinion, on a topic. To identify an author's **position**, look for direct statements that express the author's viewpoint, such as the following:

*I don't regard Black literature as simply books written by Black people, or simply as literature written about Black people...*

You'll also want to look for the specific reasons and evidence the writer presents to support his or her opinion. As you read, identify Morrison's position on the importance of the novel to society and on the characteristics that define the African-American novel. In a chart like the one shown, record the reasons and evidence she uses to support her positions. Consider whether you find these positions persuasive.

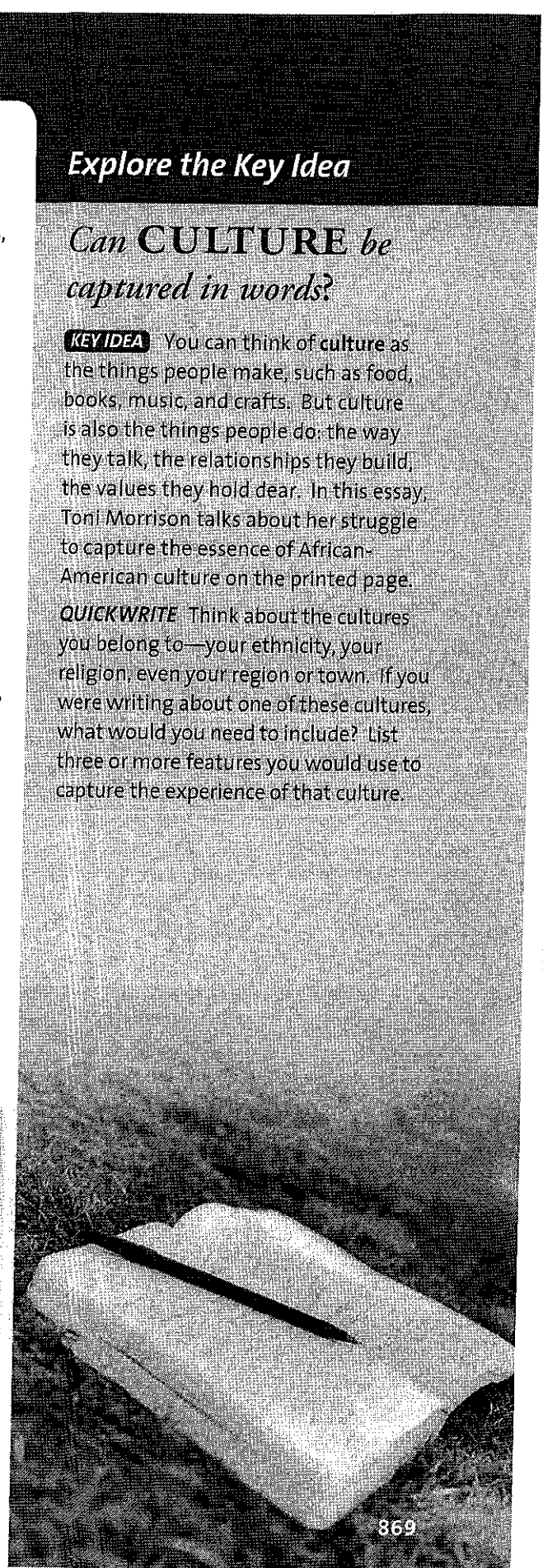
	Position	Reasons and Evidence
Importance of the Novel		
What Defines the African-American Novel		

## Explore the Key Idea

Can **CULTURE** be captured in words?

**KEY IDEA** You can think of **culture** as the things people make, such as food, books, music, and crafts. But culture is also the things people do: the way they talk, the relationships they build, the values they hold dear. In this essay, Toni Morrison talks about her struggle to capture the essence of African-American culture on the printed page.

**QUICKWRITE** Think about the cultures you belong to—your ethnicity, your religion, even your region or town. If you were writing about one of these cultures, what would you need to include? List three or more features you would use to capture the experience of that culture.





# Thoughts on the African-American Novel

*Toni Morrison*

The label “novel” is useful in technical terms because I write prose that is longer than a short story. My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it. The history of the novel as a form began when there was a new class, a middle class, to read it, it was an art form that they needed. The lower classes didn’t need novels at that time because they had an art form already: they had songs, and dances, and ceremony, and gossip, and celebrations. The aristocracy didn’t need it because they had the art that they had patronized, they had their own pictures painted, their own houses built, and they made sure their art separated them from the rest of the world. But when the industrial revolution began, there emerged a new class of people who were neither peasants nor aristocrats. In large measure they had no art form to tell them how to behave in this new situation. So they produced an art form: we call it the novel of manners, an art form designed to tell people something they didn’t know. That is, how to behave in this new world, how to distinguish between the good guys and the bad guys. How to get married. What a good living was. What would happen

#### **ANALYZE VISUALS**

Read lines 1–15. How might the painting on page 871 be compared with the “novel of manners” referred to in lines 12–13? Explain.

*Family* (1955), Charles H. Alston. Oil on canvas, 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 35 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Purchased with funds from the Artists and Students Assistance Fund. ©1997 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld, LLC.

if you strayed from the fold. So that early works such as *Pamela*, by Samuel Richardson, and the Jane Austen material<sup>1</sup> provided social rules and explained behavior, identified outlaws, identified the people, habits, and customs that one should approve of. They were didactic<sup>2</sup> in that sense. That, I think, is probably why the novel was not missed among the so-called peasant cultures. They didn't need it, because they were clear about what their responsibilities were and who and where was evil, and where was good. **A**

But when the peasant class, or lower class, or what have you, confronts the middle class, the city, or the upper classes, they are thrown a little bit into disarray. For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer *exclusively* ours, we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere. So another form has to take that place, and it seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before—and it is following along the lines of the function of novels everywhere. We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal<sup>3</sup> stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is in the novel. I regard it as a way to accomplish certain very strong functions—one being the one I just described. **B**

It should be beautiful, and powerful, but it should also *work*. It should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study,<sup>4</sup> it is not a recipe. There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is. One of which is the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede or to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered. In the same way that a musician's music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience. Now in a book, which closes, after all—it's of some importance to me to try to make that connection—to try to make that happen also. And, having at my disposal only the letters of the alphabet and some punctuation, I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective

**A LITERARY CRITICISM**

Reread lines 1–22.

Summarize Morrison's account of the origins of the novel. What was the genre's original purpose?

**B AUTHOR'S POSITION**

Reread lines 23–35.

Which sentence is the best statement of Morrison's opinion on the importance of the novel?

1. **the Jane Austen material:** Jane Austen (1775–1817) wrote several novels focused on middle-class life in her era.

2. **didactic** (dī-dăk'tīk): intended to instruct.


3. **archetypal** (ăr'kī-tī'pəl): serving as a pattern for later examples.

4. **case study:** an intensive analysis of a group, individual or unit and its development.

and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance, as it is in these other art forms that I have described. **C**

To make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken—to have the reader *feel* the narrator without *identifying* that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work *with* the author in the construction  
60 of the book—is what’s important. What is left out is as important as what is there. To describe sexual scenes in such a way that they are not clinical, not even explicit<sup>5</sup>—so that the reader brings his own sexuality to the scene and thereby participates in it in a very personal way. And owns it. To construct the dialogue so that it is heard. So that there are no adverbs attached to them: “loudly,” “softly,” “he said menacingly.” The menace should be in the sentence. To use, even formally, a chorus. The real presence of a chorus. Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead.

In the books that I have written, the chorus has changed but there has always been a choral note, whether it is the “I” narrator of *Bluest Eye*, or the town  
70 functioning as a character in *Sula*, or the neighborhood and the community that responds in the two parts of town in *Solomon*.<sup>6</sup> Or, as extreme as I’ve gotten, all of nature thinking and feeling and warching and responding to the action going on in *Tar Baby*, so that they are in the story: the trees hurt, fish are afraid, clouds report, and the bees are alarmed. Those are the ways in which I try to incorporate, into that traditional genre the novel, unorthodox novelistic characteristics—so that it is, in my view, Black, because it uses the characteristics of Black art. I am not suggesting that some of these devices have not been used before and elsewhere—only the reason why I do. I employ them as well as I can. And those  
80 are just some; I wish there were ways in which such things could be talked about in the criticism. My general disappointment in some of the criticism that my work has received has nothing to do with approval. It has something to do with the vocabulary used in order to describe these things. I don’t like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms.<sup>7</sup> I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write. **D**

I don’t regard Black literature as simply books written *by* Black people, or simply as literature written *about* Black people, or simply as literature that uses a certain mode of language in which you just sort of drop *g*’s. There is something  
90 very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to *find* that elusive but identifiable style in the books. My joy is when I think that I have approached it; my misery is when I think I can’t get there. 

**C LITERARY CRITICISM**

What does Morrison regard as the main characteristic of African-American art?

**D AUTHOR’S POSITION**

Reread lines 68–86. What examples from her own work does Morrison cite as *evidence* for her position?

5. **not clinical, not even explicit:** not coldly impersonal or even clearly detailed.

6. **Solomon:** Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*.

7. **paradigms** (pă’r-ē-dīmz’): theoretical frameworks or patterns.

## After Reading

### Comprehension

1. **Recall** With what social class does Morrison associate the novel?
2. **Clarify** According to Morrison, why is the novel especially important for African Americans?
3. **Clarify** Why is it important to Morrison to include a chorus in her fiction?

### Literary Analysis

4. **Examine Author's Position** Review the chart you created as you read. In your opinion, does Morrison provide compelling support for her positions? Explain your answer.
5. **Analyze Literary Criticism** Review the bulleted list on page 869. In what ways is Morrison's essay typical of a work of literary criticism? Support your answer with details.
6. **Analyze Details** Explain the comparison Morrison makes in lines 44–48. What does this comparison reveal about the way Morrison views her work?
7. **Compare and Contrast Authors' Perspectives** Consider the aspects of African-American culture Morrison tries to capture in her novels. What artistic goals does Morrison share with the writers of the Harlem Renaissance? How does her vision of black culture compare with theirs? Explain your answer.
8. **Evaluate Author's Purpose** Literary criticism has three main purposes: to inform readers, to express the writer's opinions, and to persuade readers to accept those opinions. Based on your reading, which of these purposes was Morrison trying to achieve with her essay? Which, if any, did she achieve? Support your answer with details.

### Literary Criticism

9. **Critical Interpretations** Consider the qualities Morrison identifies as characteristic of African-American art forms. Which of the Harlem Renaissance works you read would meet Morrison's criteria for African-American art? Cite details in your answer.