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Toni Morrison

By Cindy Ortega

Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison, an influential novelist of the black experience passed away at the age of 88 on August 5, 2019. She is credited with paving the way for a new generation of African American writers through her efforts to bring African American literature into the mainstream. By doing so, she provided a voice for those who previously had none in mainstream literature. Morrison attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., earning her bachelor's degree in English and going on to earn her master’s in American literature at Cornell. Earlier in her career as a literary giant, she worked for Random House Publishing for nearly two decades, where she became their first African American senior editor, publishing emerging black writers who would later partake in the genre she cultivated.\(^1\) In 1989, Morrison ran the creative writing program at Princeton University and, in 2006, earned the title of Robert F. Green Professor in Humanities Emeritus. In 1993, she became the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, amongst other prestigious awards. Morrison’s legacy lives on in her novels and in the impact she left behind in the literary community.

Childhood Experience

In order to understand the everlasting mark Morrison left in the literary community not only as a writer, but also as a trailblazer, it is important to look to where she drew her inspiration. Morrison was born and raised in Lorain, Ohio, to Ramah and George

Wofford who had moved to the North in an attempt to escape the violence and racism prevalent in the South in the 1930s. Lorain was a racially integrated steel town, so she was not brought up around institutionalized segregation. In an interview conducted by Razia Iqbal, Morrison details her adolescence in a racially intermixed setting, recalling having grown up amongst immigrants from Poland, Mexico, and people of color fleeing from Canada.

Her sense of identity as an African American can be attributed to her parents and family life. From a very young age, her family instilled in her the importance and power of storytelling, oftentimes having her retell stories told to her by her elders, retelling African American folktales, and singing songs that depicted a story. During her interview, Morrison says, “As a child I had to retell those stories to other adults,” and those stories “were pretty much horror stories about life as an African-American.” They were powerful and highly metaphorical but that was what was at the core of them.

In an interview at the Hay Festival in 2014, Morrison describes how her parents helped shape her identity as an African American writer, stating that her father was extremely wary of whites. Having grown up in Georgia, he had seen the harsh realities of the South. However, on the complete opposite end of the spectrum, Morrison’s mother who grew up in Alabama had a completely different view of white people, never judging people by race, but rather individually. Her mother saw no race and did not tolerate any anti-white behavior from Morrison and her siblings. Morrison’s parents opposing views would help cultivate Morrison into the literary giant she became. Her father’s wariness from his past experiences encouraged her to write about the black experience, while her mother’s standpoint on race allowed her to gently, and at times ruthlessly, recount African American folklore in her writing.

3 Ibid.
Growing up, Morrison was an avid reader, reading authors such as Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy. As Morrison began to broaden her literary horizon, she began to feel a vacancy for stories like those of her people. The lack of literature depicting her heritage and her people’s experiences ultimately led her to become a writer. Morrison was overcome by an overwhelming sense of duty to chronicle what the African American experience had been for her and those who came before her. In her interview with Razia Iqbal, Morrison goes as far as to say that had these stories already existed in the literary community, she may have never become a writer.\(^4\)

**Paving the Way for Female Authors of Color**

Toni Morrison taught English for two years at Texas Southern University before ultimately moving on to teach at Howard University for seven years. It was during this time that Morrison would go on to join a writing group in which she would begin to write her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, while also obtaining employment in the textbook division at Random House Publishing in Syracuse. After being there for two years, Morrison eventually transferred to the Random House in New York City and began editing fiction and books by up and coming African American writers. It was there that Morrison became their first female African American senior editor.

Morrison’s time at Random House was instrumental in her role of bringing African American literature into the mainstream. She devoted herself to editing work by African American writers and even went on to foster a new generation of black novelists. Morrison discovered novelist Gayle Jones and can be credited for the surge of new black writers such as Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Huey Newton, and Gayl Jones, to name a few. “Morrison paved the way for and encouraged countless writers who might otherwise have felt there was no place for people like

\(^4\) Hay Festival interview.
them in the pantheon of American literature.” Morrison led by example, without her guidance and contributions, African American literature would not have intertwined itself into the mainstream.

The Bluest Eye

*The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s 1970 debut novel, was written during her time as an editor at random house and it did what no other book had done before, “Morrison’s book cut a new path through the American literary landscape by placing young black girls at the center of the story.” In her interview with Razia Iqbal, Morrison reiterates that her first book was inspired by a real life anecdote that occurred to her and her friend. Morrison goes on to recount how her friend did not believe in the existence of God, because if God truly existed, he would have granted her the blue eyes she had prayed two years for. In order to comprehend the impact of Morrison’s work, it is important to note that this first novel gave a voice and acknowledged those who had been marginalized, disenfranchised, and ignored. Nothing like it existed at the time, Morrison states that had the genre or these stories existed before her she would not have become a writer, but instead remained a reader.

Morrison’s work builds on the experience of African American women and their struggles in society, from not fitting the standards of beauty at the time. For the lack of blue eyes, for being discriminated against for the color of their skin, Morrison beautifully and strategically unpacks it all. Through this novel,

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7 Hay Festival interview.
8 Ibid.
Morrison effectively portrayed the social lives of African American women and men, not shying away from topics such as the trauma of slavery and the lasting consequences. Today, Morrison’s novels are required reading at most high schools and are widely praised; however, that was not always the case. In 2014, Morrison discussed how, due to the nature of her writing and the realities of life as an African American, not all African Americans were supportive of her bringing light to the black experience when she initially published her first novel. She then goes on to discuss how some found her writing crude whilst others felt these stories, which had been passed down for generations, were deemed as shameful or embarrassing. Critics of her first novel, however, did not faze Morrison, as she went on to write ten more books steeped in African American realities.

Beloved

Morrison published her most notable novel, Beloved, in 1987 which was inspired by a real-life occurrence that Morrison had discovered years before when helping compile The Black Book, before essentially rewriting the occurrence with a twist. The event that inspired this novel centers around a woman named Margaret Garner, who had escaped slavery and was on the run. With slave hunters on her heels, Garner makes the decision to kill herself and her child rather than return to her life as a slave. Garner manages to murder her child but is ultimately captured before she can kill herself. This harrowing event would haunt Morrison for years to come, until she ultimately decided to write Beloved, where she brings Garner’s child back to life as a ghost, to haunt Garner and relatives. What Morrison did not realize immediately after writing this book was the impact it would have. Toni Morrison had effectively created a space for herself and other African American writers, especially women, to write the books they grew up wanting to read, books that chronicled the hardships and triumphs

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9 Hay Festival interview.
of the black community. Morrison went on to write two additional books after *Beloved*, turning it into a trilogy and, eventually, a film.

**Legacy**

![Toni Morrison in the Blue Room of the White House, 2012. Courtesy Wikimedia Commons.](image)

Toni Morrison was monumental in paving the way for African American authors, more specifically women, through her leadership in bringing African American literature to the mainstream. Though she is no longer with us, her legacy lives on through her novels, achievements, and the people she has inspired along the way. Morrison boasts a literary career peppered with prestigious awards, starting in 1988 when *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 1993, Morrison became the first African American woman and one of the few women to be awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for her work with *Beloved*. Her writings

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10 Photograph by Pete Souza, public domain as a work of the United States federal government.
inspired not only other writers, but people from all walks of life, including former President Barack Obama, who said Morrison’s book *Song of Solomon* “helped him learn how to be.” In 2012, Morrison received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Obama, the highest civilian award in the United States.

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11 Hay Festival interview.
Bibliography


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Author Bio

Cindy Ortega is a CSUSB alumna from the spring class of 2019. She has a Bachelor of Arts in History and plans to return to CSUSB for her credential to become a history teacher at the high school level. In her free time, Cindy enjoys dancing, going to concerts, and spending time with her family and dog, Lulu. She would like to thank her parents, brothers, Andrea for their unwavering support and her history best friends James and Matt for their friendship and support in this field.