Toni Morrison is one of the most lauded and recognized writers in the English language. An accomplished novelist, essayist, playwright, and librettist, Morrison’s work is distinguished by her stunningly beautiful use of language and her chronicling of the African American experience through folklore, gender issues, and the human condition. Her illustrious contributions to American letters have earned her numerous honors and have located her among the very best in the field of literature and great thinkers.

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison’s infatuation with reading began during childhood. She engrossed herself in the classic novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert, and Jane Austen. These works, in their discussion of rigid caste systems, social order, and manners were reminiscent of the oppression experienced by African Americans and spoke to the young Morrison, who admired their prose. A superb student, this love of words followed her to the historically black Howard University, where she majored in English and minored in classics, joining the ranks of such pioneering thinkers and activists as Alain Locke, Sterling A. Brown, Thurgood Marshall, and Ossie Davis. It is at Howard that she challenged the conventional thinking in academia at the time that writing by black authors and issues imperative to the black community were not the basis for serious scholarship. After graduating from Howard in 1953, she took that fight on to Cornell University, pursuing a master’s degree in English. She graduated from Cornell in 1955, writing her thesis on the subject of suicide in the novels of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.

After completing her graduate work, Morrison accepted a position at Texas Southern University in Houston and immersed herself in an environment that celebrated the study and culture of black people. In 1957, during the growing turbulence of the civil rights movement, Morrison returned to Howard University as an English instructor and in the process managed to influence some of the greatest minds in American culture. Her classes were attended by the likes of Stokely Carmichael, who went on to become one of the most dynamic leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the black power movement, and Claude Brown, author of the bestselling coming-of-age classic Manchild in the Promised Land. While teaching at Howard, she met and married Jamaican architect Harold Morrison. To this union two sons were born, Harold Ford in 1961 and Slade Kevin in 1964. The marriage would end in divorce soon after the birth of her youngest child, and about its dissolution she would forever exercise her prerogative for silence.

Morrison would soon after trade her teaching career for opportunities in the publishing industry, working first as an editor for a textbook division of Random House and then as an editor for their more commercial publications. During her tenure as the latter, she championed a significant number of black writers and publications. She published works by Muhammad Ali and such well-known political figures as Angela Davis, Huey Newton, and Andrew Young. She also shepherded to publication novels by black women writers like Gayl Jones and Toni Cade Bambara, voices that surely would have gone unheard without her stalwart dedication to their talent. She is also responsible for editing a collection of photographs and newspaper clippings representing the black experience titled The Black Book.

During her excavation of important black literary talent as an editor at Random House, Morrison also
unearthed her own penchant for writing and instigated what would soon turn into a most prodigious writing career. In her oeuvre, composed of the kind of books Morrison says she would like to read, are works that are symbolic of the struggles often faced by black people in American society. In addition, she writes of black people in love, both enraptured by and victims of their emotions, which is revolutionary in its refusal to narrowly define this culture by obvious and consistent stereotypes. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison tells the story of a young girl who prays for blue eyes in the hopes that this marker of whiteness will liberate her from the oppressive burdens placed on young girls with dark skin. She followed that work with the National Book Award–nominated *Sula* in 1973, which sprung from what Morrison felt was a lack of representation in literature about black female friendships. The novel tells the story of the relationship between two women who come together after a time apart, when the choices made about their lives put them on divergent paths. *Sula* was the subject of a debate in which a white female critic for the *New York Times* expressed concern that the novel was less important than Morrison’s nonfiction and recommended that she expand the scope of her writing to include more than stories about black life. The criticism resulted in a number of letters to the newspaper by authors like Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), who were repelled by the comments, and even inspired an incensed Morrison to speak out against this dismissal of what represented a reflection of her own life.

Morrison’s next novel was the sprawling *Song of Solomon* (1977), which incorporated African folklore and elements of magical realism and mysticism to tell the story of Milkman Dead and his journey to the South to discover a secret treasure of gold that supposedly belongs to his family but instead discovers a connection to his spirituality and ancestry. The first of her works to focus on a male protagonist, *Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award, became the first Book-of-the-Month Club selection by a black author since Richard Wright’s *Native Son* of 1940, and announced Morrison as a major literary figure. *Tar Baby* (1981) continues the tradition of African and African American folklore begun in *Song of Solomon*. Inspired by the Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby tales, the novel is a love story about a young black fashion model, her white patron, and a renegade that unfolds in the Caribbean, on the streets of Manhattan, and in the South. The novel addresses issues of interracial relationships, sexual violence, obsession, and differences in black culture. The occasion of the publication of the book also saw Morrison become the first black woman to appear on the cover of *Newsweek*. What followed *Tar Baby* is the book many feel is Morrison’s masterpiece and the basis for her receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature.

*Beloved* (1987), a superlative blend of slave narrative and ghost story, derives from a newspaper clipping about a young runaway slave woman named Margaret Garner that Morrison discovered while editing *The Black Book*. Rather than see her children fall into the cruel and sadistic clutches of slavery, Garner tried to kill her three children. She succeeded in killing only one, slitting the child’s throat. Building on this foundation, Morrison told of a similar woman who had committed the same desperate act only to have a young girl show up on her doorstep appearing to be the child she killed in a body representative of the age she would have been had she lived. The presence of this child and her slow and methodical reclaiming of her mother reinforces Morrison’s larger themes of motherhood, masculinity, and the atrocities and effects of slavery. *Beloved* was the source of tremendous critical claim, winning the Pulitzer Prize and inspiring the ambitious film version starring Oprah Winfrey and directed by Jonathan Demme.

In 1992, Morrison simultaneously released two works: *Jazz*, a novel about a doomed 1920s Harlem love
triangle, and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In the latter, Morrison challenges the reader to reconsider the presence and influence of black culture and characters in some of the most celebrated works of the American literary canon. Since its publication, the book has been highly referenced in scholarly works on topics of gender and race in literature. The following year, Morrison would become the first black woman and the eighth woman in history to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. The Swedish Academy, among other reasons, awarded her the distinction for the poetry and vision found in her novels.

Morrison followed this historic accomplishment with *Paradise* in 1998, a tale about mysterious events at a convent told by the women who inhabited it, and *Love* (2001), a novel about the owner of a black resort and the effects he had on the lives around him even after his death. She has also written a play based on the life and racist murder of Emmett Till, *Dreaming Emmett* (1986); an opera based on the case of Margaret Garner, *Margaret Garner* (2005); and a series of children’s picture books with her son Slade Kevin. She has also edited books on two of the most sensational court cases of the 20th century, *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power* (about the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas case) and *Birth of a Nation 'Hood* (about the O. J. Simpson trial). Toni Morrison is currently Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University.

*See also*
Civil Rights Movement; Literature and Activism

**Further Readings**


Mark Douglas Cunningham

**APA**

**Chicago**

**Harvard**

**MLA**

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA