

MJC ENGLISH, SEM-IV

Toni Morrison's Biography

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. She was a Nobel Prize-winning novelist most famous for her exploration of the Black experience, particularly the Black female experience. She grew up in the Midwest and developed a deep love of storytelling and folklore from a young age. She credited her family and upbringing for her love and appreciation of Black culture. She received her undergraduate degree from Howard University in 1953 and her master's degree from Cornell University in 1955, completing a thesis on William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Afterward, she taught at Texas Southern University and then at Howard, in Washington, D.C., where she met Harold Morrison, an architect from Jamaica. They were married from 1958 to 1964, and the couple had two sons. After the couple split up and the birth of her second son, Morrison moved to New York and became an editor at Random House, specializing in Black fiction. During this difficult and somewhat lonely time, she began working on her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970.

Morrison is known for her deft examination of the Black experience. She often covered themes of injustice, oppression, racism, and identity with her captivating, poetic prose. Morrison's body of work is extensive, including ten novels, seven works of nonfiction, two plays, and three children's stories. Her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* was followed by *Sula* in 1973, which secured Morrison a nomination for the National Book Award. In 1977, Morrison won the National Book Critics Circle Award for her book *Song of Solomon*. Her other works include *Tar Baby* (1981), her only short story, "Recitatif" (1983), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), and, of course, *Beloved*. That novel, considered by many to be her best, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. In 1993, she then became the first African American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, which was the same year that *Beloved* was adapted into a film starring Oprah Winfrey.

Morrison was the chair of the Humanities Department at Princeton University from 1989 until her retirement in 2006. She was a gifted essayist and sought-after speaker. Among her many accolades, Morrison was granted an honorary degree from Oxford University in 2005, and she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama in 2012. Morrison passed away in 2019 due to complications from pneumonia in New York City at the age of 88.

Background on *Beloved*

Set during the Reconstruction era in 1873, *Beloved* centers on the powers of memory and history. For the former enslaved people in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willfully try to forget. Yet for Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, memories of slavery are inescapable. They continue to haunt her, literally, in the spirit of her deceased daughter. Eighteen years earlier, Sethe had murdered this daughter in order to save her from a life of slavery. Morrison borrowed the event from the real story of Margaret Garner, who, like Sethe, escaped from slavery in Kentucky and murdered her child when slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio. *Beloved* straddles the line between fiction and history; from the experiences of a single family, Morrison creates a powerful commentary on the psychological and historical legacy of slavery.

Part of Morrison's project in *Beloved* is to recuperate a history that had been lost to the ravages of forced silences and willed forgetfulness. Morrison writes Sethe's story with the voices of a people who historically have been denied the power of language. *Beloved* also contains a didactic element. From Sethe's experience, we learn that before a stable future can be created, we must confront and understand the "ghosts" of the past. Morrison suggests that, like Sethe, contemporary American readers must confront the history of slavery in order to address its legacy, which manifests itself in ongoing racial discrimination and discord.

Morrison once said that she wanted to help create a canon of Black work, noting that Black writers too often have to pander to a white audience when they should be able to concentrate on the business of writing instead. Many readers believe Morrison's novels go a long way toward the establishment of her envisioned tradition. The poetic, elegant style of her writing in *Beloved* panders to no one. Morrison challenges and requires the reader to accept her on her own terms.