30 CRITICS DISCUSS

Toni Morrison

(1931-2019)

"Toni Morrison's novels have attracted both popular and critical attention for their inventive blend of realism and fantasy, unsparing social analysis, and passionate philosophical concerns. The combination of social observation with broadening and allusive commentary gives her fictions the symbolic quality of myth, and in fact the search for a myth adequate to experience is one of Morrison's central themes…All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence.

She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here is less a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives. The theme of 'invisibility' is, of course, a common one in black American literature, but Morrison avoids the picture of the black person 'invisible' in white life (Ellison's Invisible Man trying to confront passersby). Instead, she immerses the reader in the black community; the white society's ignorance of that concrete, vivid, and diverse world is thus even more striking….Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception. The world of all three novels is distinguished by the discrepancy between name and reality….

Sula (1973) begins with a description of the black neighborhood 'called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills'…another misnamed, even reversed situation, in this case the result of a white man's greedy joke….And *Song of Solomon* [1977] is full of characters with ludicrous, multiple, or lost names, like the first Macon Dead, who received 'this heavy name scrawled in perfect thoughtlessness by a drunken Yankee in the Union Army'…In all these cases, the misnaming does not eliminate the reality of the black world; invisibility is not non-existence. But it does reflect a distortion. Blacks are visible to white culture only insofar as they fit its frame of reference and serve its needs. Thus they are consistently reduced and reified, losing their independent reality. Mrs. Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* [1970] has a nickname, 'Polly,' that only whites use; it reduces her dignity and identifies her as 'the ideal servant'….

[Some] characters are in Bad Faith not because they recognize other viewers, but because they use others to escape their own responsibility to define themselves. The woman who, like Mrs. Breedlove, feels most powerful when most submerged in flesh, most like a *thing*, similarly falls into Bad Faith….Such characters can fall into Bad Faith not only by dependence on one other, but also by internalizing the 'Look' of the majority culture. The novels are full of characters who try to live up to an external image—Dick and Jane's family, or cosmopolitan society, or big business. This conformity is not just a disguise, but an attempt to gain power and control. There is always the hope that if one fits the prescribed pattern, one will be seen as human….The problem with such internalization is not that it is ambitious, but that it is life-denying, eliminating 'the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. One who really accepts the external definition of the self gives up spontaneous feeling and choice."

Cynthia A. Davis
"Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction"
Contemporary Literature 23.3
(Summer 1982) 323-42

"Ohio-born novelist, originally named Chloe Anthony Wofford, a graduate of Howard University, writes about the problems of black women in the North, like herself. Her novels include *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981). She is also an editor at a New York publishing house."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1946-83) 509

"Toni Morrison creates conventionally stable central characters. Moreover, she adds even greater reliability by using primarily omniscient narrations; even when there is a first-person narrator, as in *The Bluest Eye*, that voice is complemented by an omniscient perspective….But in fact, she uses the narrative to present disordered, violent, perverse world…These novels present us with murder, incest, necrophilia, child abuse, insanity, terrifying family secrets, and a general sense of life teetering on the edge of dissolution. Such material presented through reliable narration creates a tension that intensifies the emotional impact of the fiction.

The rational telling of extreme events forces a radical reconsideration of commonly held assumptions about black life and black-white relationships. Through its extremism, it defamiliarizes the reader by pointing to the violent effects of such ordinary phenomena as popular culture, bourgeois ideas about property, love, sexual initiation and sex roles, family, and the past….She dramatizes the destructive power implicit in the control of various symbolic systems. In her fiction that power creates grotesque victims, often including those who seem to be in positions of domination. Her novels are quest tales in which key characters search for the hidden sign capable of giving them strength and/or identity. In a significant twist, those who find what they seek become the most thoroughly victimized, while those who are turned in their searches toward some other goal (which is usually an absence rather than the originally desired presence) are most often triumphant. The changed pursuit is in the direction of some black folk value, such as true community, true family name, or authentic black history. The revision of goals makes possible a loosening of the control of logocentrism so as to achieve a black selfhood that negates that control."

Keith E. Byerman
"Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison"
Fingering the Jagged Grain:
Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction
(U Georgia 1985) 184-216

"Morrison's novels are peopled with conventionally evil characters, outsiders in a decadent, white-dominated culture, Cains and Liliths in the guise of Cholly Breedlove (*The Bluest Eye*) or Sula (*Sula*) or Guitar (*Song of Solomon*) or Son (*Tar Baby*). Ambiguous figures—on one hand characters of extreme violence and cruelty and, on the other hand, rebels against a morally deficient system—each of these suggests that evil can be redemptive and that goodness can be enslaving. In the language of existential theology, those who sin against the flawed order become the agents of experience and so run the risk of freedom. Those who do not are often doomed to moral entropy….

Yet Morrison's fictions are not simplistic polemics on the viciousness generated by a white society, though to be sure she unreservedly indicts the materialistic white culture and severely judges those blacks who adopt its values. Morrison's work exceeds mere invective. At their most profound level, the novels penetrate the characters themselves, exposing their own capacity for cowardice. Rather than sympathetic victims, they become responsible for their own actions and inactions. In all her major novels the fall from innocence becomes a necessary gesture of freedom and a profound act of self-awareness. It assumes the nature of a potentially tragic action, a paradoxical victory and defeat. In one way or another each work describes a fall wrought with anguish and destructive power but morally superior to a state of self-ignorance and sterile accommodation….

Morrison applies this 'fortunate fall' idea through characters who must violate the prescribed conditions of a white society, must destroy the false identity ascribed them as blacks in a spurious 'garden' to achieve wholeness and self-consciousness. Those co-opted by the system, such as Pauline Breedlove or Helene Wright or Ruth Dead, or those victimized by it, such as Pecola Breedlove, endure unredeemable defeat. Only those courageous and strong enough to deny the order can gain a measure of victory….Morrison employs images of a fallen paradise in all her novels. One of Pecola Breedlove's early encounters with white contempt takes place on 'Garden Avenue' where she goes to Mr. Jacobowski's candy store to buy Mary Jane candies. *Sula*'s tragic events take place in Bottom, so called because 'when God looks down, it's bottom….It's the bottom of heaven—best land there is.' In *Song of Solomon* Guitar Bains alludes derisively

to the 'nigger heaven,' Honore Island, where wealthy blacks try to establish an island resort free from the suffering in the black community."

Terry Otten
"The Crime of Innocence in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*"
Studies in American Fiction 14.2
(Autumn 1986) 153-64

"Toni Morrison is clear about her major subject: 'I'm interested,' she says, 'in survival—who survives and who does not, and why—and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety might be.' Like the medieval cartographers who illustrated their maps with mythic figures of promise and danger, Morrison recognizes the psychic as well as the physical risks of exploration. Black writing, in particular, she feels, lacks the secure sense of closure associated with Western or classical art: 'I think about what black writers do as having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends.' This open-endedness mingles in Morrison's own work with precise, highly controlled use of metaphor, vivid visual images, and an almost baroque allusiveness. But it manifests itself primarily in her ability to draw her readers into active participation in the creative process. 'If the life of my novels is long,' she says, 'then the readers who wish to read my books will know that it is not I who do it: It is they who do'….

All of Morrison's novels deal with 'the complexity of how people behave under duress…The qualities they show at the end of an event when their backs are up against the wall.' In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1969), Morrison examines the personal and social implications of the American (including black American) ideal of light-skinned beauty. Described by one reviewer as 'charged with pain and wonder,' the novel not only portrays the lives of those whose dark skin and Negroid features blight their lives; it also explores the human loss that occurs when beauty goes unrecognized. *Sula* (1973), which was nominated for the 1975 National Book Award, depicts a young black woman whose hard-won independence so threatens her family and neighbors that they scorn and reject her.

In *Song of Solomon* (1977), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, Morrison portrays a young black man, Macon Dead, as he attempts to come to terms with his heritage. Structured around the black legend of a flying man, *Song of Solomon* is an especially powerful rendering of black life—or more precisely, of what Morrison calls "the imaginative combination of the real world, the very shrewd, practical, day-to-day functioning that black people must do, while at the same time encompassing some great supernatural event.' In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison describes the interaction of a young black woman named Jadine, who is a Paris model and a graduate student, with an escaped convict named Son, as they try to come to terms simultaneously with their mutual attraction and the vast differences that their heritages impose."

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 2614-15

"The attraction of opposite social classes that initially brings Milkman and Guitar together is similar to the magnetism between Sula and Nel or the delicate class comforts that barely distinguish Pecola from Frieda and Claudia, yet allow the sisters to take Pecola under their wings. Morrison's characters appear to find stability in kinship ties and bonds of friendship that cut across class barriers and generational differences. Note the strong matrilinear network linking Eva-Hannah-Sula, for example, or the generational patterning among Pilate-Reba-Hagar. These sets of historical relationships anchor Sula and Pilate in a culture and family they use for support, particularly when the larger society rejects them as pariahs. Their hearths are comforting and inviting to Nel and Milkman, who are fleeing the stultifying middle-class repression that renders them marginal and homeless. Morrison's use of class differences as one element of mutual attraction suggests that economic conditions alone do not alienate lower or middle classes from a common culture. In *Song of Solomon* this idea is explored further when members of two different social classes represent the same family."

Melvin Dixon
"Like an Eagle in the Air: Toni Morrison"
Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature
(U Illinois 1987) 141-69

"Between 1859, when Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* appeared, and 1964, at least fifty-nine such works by black women went into print. That number has probably doubled since 1964….But if Morrison claims the black aesthetic in place of modernism, and if…the black male tradition often presented 'roadblocks' for black female writers, then within that later tradition she claims a black women's 'tradition…[a] world as perceived by black women at certain times…however they treat it, and whatever they select out of it to record.' Writing out of both the black and black women's traditions, her novels are a rejection of white patriarchal modernism [no such thing exists], and are radical revisions of the race and male-centered Afro-American literary tradition, and aim to liberate the latter from the social realism into which it has long been mired….

White critics praised Morrison's writing—her precise poetic prose, her vision, her perceptions of black pain, and the ways in which she constructed narrative—but…Pecola Breedlove and Eva and Sula Peace bear no resemblance to the stereotypes of black women that populate our national literature….*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* disturb readers in disquieting ways. On the other hand, *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, brilliant novels in their own right, are considerably less confusing, threatening, or intimidating for white readers than the earlier books [on the contrary, *Tar Baby* depicts all the white characters as racists]. Even with its focus on black history and myth, *Song of Solomon* embraces the comfortable, familiar Anglo-Western theme of the young man in search of himself. Pecola Breedlove and Eva and Sula Peace force reader confrontations with an unsettling concrete reality of pain and suffering, while Pilate, the most significant woman in *Song of Solomon*, is larger than life, a mythic figure, transcending time and place and the abilities of mortals….These two novels gave many white readers themes and patterns with which they could identify. Their 'black texts' were often unrecognized….

While there has never been any doubt that Morrison grounds her work in black culture, issues of feminism have been more ambiguous for critics. This comes partly from the writer's often stated rejection of many of the goals of white feminism, a stance which, in fact, is common among black women…. Morrison rejects the feminism that removes black women from their cultural moorings and through women like Eva Peace and Pilate makes a case for a feminism that remains wedded to the interests of men and women in the black community."

Nellie Y. McKay, ed.
Critical Essays on Toni Morrison
(G. K. Hall 1988) 2, 5-6, 12

"The feminist position that Morrison advocates for black women is one that aligns itself with the cultural values of the ethnic group—that validates the traditional beauty and strengths of black women. Thus the women that Morrison celebrates in her fiction are those who exhibit the traditional values of black womanhood. Drawing from the African myth of the 'tar lady,' Morrison calls the historical ability of black women to keep their families and their households together the 'tar quality.' And it is in the development of these 'tar women' that Morrison herself engages in the kind of ethnic cultural feminism that she advocates. The older black women she described in *The Bluest Eye* provide an eloquent panoramic example of what Morrison considers the 'tar quality' of black women…

These women held things together inside and outside the home; they understood the historical circumstances that limited their own potential as well as that of their men, yet they took that and created their own positive images. They took care of their families, loved their husbands, and were not preoccupied with physical standards of beauty as a measurement of self worth. They did not resent the roles they necessarily served in their families and their communities. Although their roles might be viewed by contemporary standards as limiting, they were the roles that sustained black family and community life.

Many such 'tar women' exist in Morrison's novels. First there is Mrs. McTeer, the mother of the narrator in *The Bluest Eye*….There is also Eva Peace, the mother and grandmother in *Sula*. Eva too, albeit through questionable means, takes care of her children and the homeless, and has, although she hates her exhusband, an ongoing relationship with men….Pilate, the memorable character of *Song of Solomon*, is Morrison's mythical tar woman incarnate. Defying all Anglo-Saxon standards of physical beauty, Pilate is perhaps the most awesomely attractive of Morrison's women characters….And finally there is Ondine, the

assiduous cook and housekeeper in *Tar Baby*….Jadine and Sula are Morrison's objectors; they speak out against their oppression and criticize black women who serve these roles.

The responsibility of daughterhood is the unspoken but expected role that black women define for each other. It is what Sula and Jadine reject, and what Pecola and Pauline, because they fall prey to victimization, never understand. Ondine and the women like her hold proudly and steadfastly to the values of black womanhood. They are the 'tar women' whom Morrison applauds and whose value, she believes, should not be minimized by attention to the wrong value system or by existential longings and separate self-definitions. They provide the consistency that holds their families and communities together. Mrs. McTeer, Eva, Pilate, Ondine, and the old women of *The Bluest Eye* are the heroines of Morrison's fiction. They did not have societal support systems that paid them well or appreciated their beauty and the often dual role as homemaker and provider they assumed in their families. But somehow these women…kept their vision and their energies focused on that which was worthwhile and sustaining. Morrison's emphasis on their selflessness and their strength is not to romanticize their limited opportunity for adventure or fulfillment outside the boundaries of their own communities. Instead it is to show the value and the difficulty of the role they did serve." [This critic likes Ondine more than Morrison does.]

Carolyn Denard
"The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison"
Critical Essays on Toni Morrison (1988) 175-78

"Morrison always begins her narrative with an arresting event: the presentation (casual in its tone) of a child having her father's baby (*The Bluest Eye*); an insurance agent attempting to fly off a roof (*Song of Solomon*); Shadrack announcing National Suicide Day (*Sula*); or a sailor jumping ship and braving a treacherous overtow that sweeps him out to sea (*Tar Baby*). In each novel, Morrison immediately plunges the reader into the midst of tangled lives made complex by their personal histories and made interesting by their mystery. Each life skirts the edge of madness born of human will and eccentricity. Morrison has an eye for the fantastic in human behavior, that which seems eccentric only because of the telling but which is, in fact, quite familiar and even normal. The Shadracks, Pecolas, and Milkmans are all too familiar in the lore of black folk culture; only in the objectification or transformation into word do they become somehow 'strange.' Morrison has the instinct of the dramatist for selecting and heightening that which is hidden and ignored in human experience…

Morrison's ability to step out of her own gender into the complex of attitudes, experiences, and rituals of another gender is fundamental to the creation of characters who are well-defined, complex, and engaging. She is equally adept at shaping female characters who speak with distinct voices. The best examples occur in *Sula*, her only novel built around the friendship of two women, Sula and Nel….The past is ever-present as folklore and attitudes perpetuated by the community and as scars on the mind and spirit….

Realism is not a likely option—a chronological depiction of daily reality or sequential plot development…would fail to convey the total integration of the past and present which is so critical to Morrison's vision. A theatrical form or style that allows for a fluid use of memory and time and expresses subjective perspective will come much closer to capturing the unique qualities of her writing."

Margaret B. Wilkerson
"The Dramatic Voice in Toni Morrison's Novels"
Critical Essays on Toni Morrison (1988) 180, 182, 184-85

"Many critics have noted Morrison's use of myth, citing the Philomela/Persephone myth in *The Bluest Eye*, the scapegoat myth in *Sula*, the Gullah and biblical myths in *Song of Solomon*, and her continuing interest in Joseph Campbell's 'monomyth.' Focusing on individual novels, however, obscures the increasing complexity of Morrison's approach to myth. Although *The Bluest Eye* asserts the destructiveness of unquestioning acceptance of the Euro-American myth of beauty, Morrison's use of the Persephone myth to structure and clarify the meaning of Pecola's experience is generally consistent with Eliot's idea of the 'mythic method.' By *Song of Solomon*, however, she has begun to develop the meta-mythic sensibility that will emerge fully in *Tar Baby*. Juxtaposing the myths of the flying African and the Native American 'bird' clan with the Euro-American myths of Icarus and the Cavaliers (the Byrd clan), Morrison suggests the

multiplicity of repressed historical experience….Where *Song of Solomon* emphasizes Milkman's developing understanding of this repressed history, *Tar Baby* expands the focus to involve a multitude of individuals engaged in similar processes. Morrison's panoramic presentation of the complex…Afro-American experience focuses on the way individuals—both blacks and the whites who frame their world—express and reflect on the tar baby myth."

Craig H. Werner
"The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth: Morrison, Barthes and Tar Baby As-Is"
Critical Essays on Toni Morrison (1988) 156

"Morrison's technique is purposefully epical; her leading characters—Eva and Sula (Milkman and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*) attain mythic proportions, carrying with them echoes and silhouettes of biblical, classical, or 'modernist' heroes. It is not surprising, then, that Sula's rebellion in the self-created form of a 'dangerously free' black woman living in the first half of the twentieth century has Promethean overtones; 'What's burning in me is mine!' she tells her grandmother, 'And I'll split this town in two and everything in it before I'll let you put it out!'…Thus, Morrison's narrative makes it clear that Sula's 'evil' is merely a convenient social label. The cognitive-psychological 'essence' of Sula remains a mystery. [Ask Chicken Little what he thinks her essence is. Sula is a sociopath.]

Robert Grant
"Absence into Presence:
"The Thematics of Memory and 'Missing' Subjects in Toni Morrison's *Sula*"
Critical Essays on Toni Morrison (1988) 93

"Perhaps no black writer, man or woman, has attracted as much attention in the last decade as novelist Toni Morrison. She has been claimed as a spokeswoman in her fiction for any number of points of view, including Marxist and feminist. Others have tried to characterize her as a postmodern fictionalist whose work reveals the deep fissures in our comfortable illusion that the world outside the text has come kind of innate coherence apart from that conferred by language. Most of these claims tend to 'modernize' or 'postmodernize' Toni Morrison's work by seeing her as a reviser of past traditions in fiction which have been predominantly male, or white, or upper-class….

Most attempts to see Morrison's work as technically disjunctive run afoul of the fundamentally anti-experimental quality of her prose and of her unwillingness to be readily categorized wither as an innovator or a traditionalist. Although some have termed her work 'magical realism,' her novels tend to be fairly representational and not especially technically innovative. Morrison's work relies on fundamentally linear plotting, the use of rounded characters, and a generally mimetic conception of the novel….

Her technical emphasis on the capacity of the story to create history makes difficult her characterization as a writer at odds with so much of the literary tradition that precedes her. Her technical emphasis on suggestion and evocation rather than brute representation is a function of seeing experience as needing relative clarification….Morrison forces the reader to fill in the spaces—to create a sense of history by means of apprehending a fiction. She does this by a conscious play between two pairs of values: opacity and transparency and rigidity and fluidity. The essence of her fiction is to set these opposites in motion, forcing her characters (and her readers) to take obscuring opacities and try to make them transparent, and paralyzing rigidities and make them more fluid."

Theodore O. Mason, Jr.
"The Novelist as Conservator:
Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"
Contemporary Literature 29.4
(Winter 1988) 564-80

"Toni Morrison has advanced the Afro-American literary canon by producing unselfconscious works about the experiences of blacks in America for a black audience. Yet in spite of the specificity of her subject matter, her novels, some of which have been translated into other languages, have earned a heartfelt popular and critical approval through their universal appeal….She never discusses publicly her former husband, Harold Morrison, but has disclosed that in the marriage she had lost feelings of purpose, self-worth, and autonomy….In 1988, *Beloved* won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction, surpassing the

recognition earned by the other novels: *The Bluest Eye* appeared in the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*…(1985)…A condensed version of *Sula* was published in *Redbook* magazine in 1974; *Son of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 1977 and was a selection for the Book-of-the-Month Club; and *Tar Baby* quickly became a nationwide best-seller."

Timothy J. Cox
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1071-73

"Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* grew out of a story she wrote for a writers' group and once her career as author was launched, she won the National Book Award nomination for *Sula* in 1974. In 1977 *Song of Solomon* was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection (the first novel by a black writer to be a selection since Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. All of Morrison's novels have been extremely well received partly because her work is highly skilled (in ways that mainstream readers appreciate). She writes as fluently and as individualistically as Faulkner, yet as conscious of racial themes and techniques as Ellison. Most of her novels draw increasingly on black myth and ritual—and understanding—and the 1987 *Beloved* has been unanimously acclaimed.

Few writers have been as conscious of their impact on the American culture, and so willing to give interviews, public appearances, and readings. Morrison speaks simply about her fiction: 'all the time that I write, I am writing about love or its absence.' *The Bluest Eye*, a virtuoso narrative that begins with the primer text describing the mainstream family and house—then quickened and telescoped into illegibility as the black reader's experience makes the mainstream experience unintelligible—and tells the story of the poor and unloved Pecola Breedlove, has become a classic of high school and college literature courses. Morrison says of it that its themes are 'beauty, miracles, and self-images.'

Of all her writing, she says the fictions exist to show readers 'how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something.' Being black and female, Morrison understands the place of victim—though she has not lived her life with that mentality. Morrison rather, is a survivor, and has learned lessons that her fiction instills in readers. She also is one of America's greatest writers, continuously inventive and skillful, and continuously experimental."

Linda Wagner-Martin
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D. C. Heath 1990) 1993

"I reread Morrison because of her imagination, whatever her social purposes, transcends ideology and polemics, and enters again into the literary space occupied only by fantasy and romance of authentic aesthetic dignity. Extraliterary purposes, however valid or momentous they may be for a time, ebb away, and we are left with story, characters, and style, that is to say, with literature or the lack of literature. Morrison's five novels to date leave us with literature, and not with a manifesto for social change, however necessary and admirable such change would be…[As] an African-American feminist and Marxist novelist…Toni Morrison has developed a powerful stance that intervenes forcefully in the cultural politics of her time and place…

Faulkner's mode of narration is exquisitely modulated by Morrison, but the accent of Faulkner always can be heard in Morrison's narrators…It is not a question of allusion or of echoing but of style, stance, tone, prose rhythm, and mimetic mode, and these do stem from an amalgam of Faulkner and Woolf, the father and mother of Morrison's art, as it were. Woolf and Faulkner are poets of loss, who search past and present for the negative epiphanies of vanished moments, possibilities, radiances, hopes. The narrative voice in Morrison turns always upon the negative magic of the romancer. Her perfect sentence is: 'If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it.' That is her epitome…

The most authentic power in Morrison's work is the romance writer's sense that 'it's much, much, much too late,' that one's cry of grief and loss 'had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.' In some sense, all of Morrison's protagonists leap wheeling toward the death struggle, with the fine abandon of Faulkner's doom-eager men and women. Toni Morrison, in her time and place, answering

to the travail of her people, speaks to the needs of an era, but her art comes out of a literary tradition not altogether at one with her cultural politics."

Harold Bloom, ed.
Modern Critical Views: Toni Morrison
(Chelsea House 1990) 2-5

"Toni Morrison may well be the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature. Indeed, her signal accomplishment as a writer is that she has managed, uncannily, to invent her own mode of literary representation. Her themes are often those expected of Naturalist fiction—the burdens of history, the determining social effects of race, gender, or class—but they are also the great themes of lyrical Modernism: love, death, betrayal, and the burden of the individual's responsibility for her or his own fate. Never is 'history' faceless in her work, never are individuals absolved from the responsibility for their own actions.

While she is clearly influenced by them magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his Latin American contemporaries, Morrison and Marquez meet independently at a common ancestor, William Faulkner. Grounded in Faulkner, and informed by James Baldwin's densely lyrical experiments with a fictional prose rooted in the religious vernacular (the spirituals and gospel music, King Jamesian biblical cadences and allusions, the spoken Black prophetic voice) as well as jazz, blues, and the whole range of Black secular vernacular speech rituals and discourses, Morrison has evolved a register of representation that we might think of as a magical naturalism. Her work, in this sense, spans that great divide between the lyrical modernism of Zora Neale Hurston on the one hand, and the existential naturalist experimentation of Richard Wright on the other….

Her writing is at once difficult and popular: A subtle craftsperson and a compelling weaver of tales, she 'tells a good story,' but the stories she tells are not calculated to please. Narratives of incestuous rape (*The Bluest Eye*), of a mother's abuse of her son (*Tar Baby*) or murder of her daughter (*Beloved*), or of a man's murder of his lover (*Jazz*)—these do not on the surface seem to be the sort of stories to attract the wide readership that Morrison commands….Morrison's greatest capacities as a writer are her ability to create a densely lyrical narrative texture that is instantly recognizable as her own and make the particularity of the African-American 'experience' the basis for a representation of humanity…Her novels are never 'about' the Black community of Lorain, Ohio, in the thirties and forties, even when they are apparently set there…. Morrison's work is always symbolic of the shared human condition, both engaging with and transcending lines of gender, race, and class."

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present
Gates and K. A. Appiah, eds.
(Amistad 1993) ix-x

"In her first three novels, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Toni Morrison explores the interplay between self-knowledge and social role. Her characters, like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, inhabit a world where inhospitable social assumptions obtain. But Morrison does not provide her people with the option of living underground, in isolation, beyond community. Those whom social relations exclude (like Pecola Breedlove of *The Bluest Eye* or Sula) lack self-knowledge and are destroyed by themselves or by others….*Song of Solomon* [is] the only one of Morrison's novels in which her protagonist completes successfully his/her search for psychological autonomy."

Valerie Smith
"*Song of Solomon*: Continuities of Community"
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993) 274

"Toni Morrison's works are fantastic earthy realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Primal in their essence, her characters come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but as basic as the earth they stand on. They erupt, out of the world, sometimes gently, often with force and terror. Her work is sensuality combined with an intrigue that only a piercing intellect could create.

Two of her three novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974) reveal a consistency of vision, for they illustrate the growth of a theme as it goes through many transformations in much the same way as a good jazz musician finds the hidden melodies within a musical phrase. Both novels chronicle the search for beauty amidst the restrictions of life, both from within and without. In both novels, the black woman, as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured.

Double-faced, her focal characters look outward and search inward, trying to find some continuity between the seasons, the earth, other people, the cycles of life, and their own particular lives. Often they find that there is conflict between their own nature and the society that man has made, to the extent that one seems to be an inversion of the other….Because Morrison's probings are so relentless, her sounds so authentic, and her appreciation of complexity so profound, we are able to recognize, as do Claudia and Nel, the patterning of beauty and waste in the history of Pecola and Sula and their communities. As a result, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* teach us a lesson about the integral relationship between the destructive limits imposed on the black woman and the inversions of truth in this society."

Barbara Christian
"The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison"
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993) 59, 98

"Migration to the North signifies more than a confrontation with (and contamination by) the white world. It implies a transition in social class. Throughout Morrison's writing, the white world is equated with the bourgeois class—its ideology and life-style. This is true of *Song of Solomon* in which Macon Dead's attitudes toward rents and property make him more 'white' than 'black.' This is true of *Tar Baby* in which notions of bourgeois morality and attitudes concerning the proper education and role of women have created a contemporary 'tar baby,' a black woman in cultural limbo. And it is made dramatically clear in *The Bluest Eye*, whose epigrammatic introduction and subsequent chapter headings are drawn from a white, middle-class 'Dick-and-Jane' reader. In giving voice to the experience of growing up black in a society dominated by white, middle-class ideology. Morrison is writing against the privatized world of surburban house and nuclear family, whose social and psychological fragmentation does not need her authorial intervention, but is aptly portrayed in the language of the reader: 'Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy.'

The problem at the center of Morrison's writing is how to maintain an Afro-American cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural South has been stretched thin over distance and generations. Although a number of black Americans will criticize her problematizing of Afro-American culture, seeing in it a symptom of Morrison's own relationship to white bourgeois society as a successful writer and editor, there are a number of social and historical factors that argue in support of her position. These include the dramatic social changes produced by recent wide-scale migration of industry to the South, which has transformed much of the rural population into wage laborers; the development, particularly in the Northern cities, of a black bourgeoisie; and the coming into being, under late capitalism, of a full-blown consumer society capable of homogenizing society by recouping cultural difference….

Morrison's projection of a social utopia arises from its confrontation with and reversal of the male-dominated bourgeois social model….The utopian aspect of her vision is produced by the totality of its opposition to society at large—not by its individual members….Pilate demonstrates the insufficiency of the agrarian social mode to provide for its members once they are transplanted to urban consumer society. Her strength and resourcefulness cannot be passed on to her daughter and granddaughter because each is more distant from the rural society in which Pilate worked and grew up. Their experience of insufficiency leads to hollow consumption (Reba's sex and Hagar's of commodities) and demonstrates the way consumer society penetrates and impoverishes human relationship….

The temporal focus of each of Morrison;s novels pinpoints strategic moments in black American history during which social and cultural forms underwent disruption and transformation. Both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* focus on the forties, a period of heavy black migration to the cities, when, particularly in the Midwest, black 'neighborhoods' came into being as annexes of towns that had never before had a sizable black population. *Sula* expands the period of the forties by looking back to the First World War, when blacks as a

social group were first incorporated into a modern capitalist system as soldiers, and it looks ahead to the sixties, when cultural identity seems to flatten out, and…all young people tend to look like the 'Deweys,' the book's nameless and indistinguishable orphans.

Song of Solomon focuses on the sixties, when neighborhoods are perceived from the outside and called ghettos, a time of urban black political activism and general countercultural awareness. And *Tar Baby*, Morrison's most recent book, is best characterized as a novel of the eighties, in which the route back to cultural origins is very long and tenuous, making many individuals cultural exiles. With this as an outline of modern black history in the United States, Morrison develops the social and psychological aspects that characterize the lived experience of historical transition. For the black emigrant to the North, the first of these is alienation….

Morrison's aim in writing is very often to disrupt alienation with what she calls eruptions of 'funk.' Dismayed by the tremendous influence of bourgeois society on young black women newly arrived from the deep South cities like 'Meridian, Mobile, Aiken and Baton Rouge,' Morrison describes the women's loss of spontaneity and sensuality. They learn 'how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions….'Funk' is really nothing more than the intrusion of the past into the present. It is most oppositional when it juxtaposes a not-so-distant social mode to those evolved under bourgeois society.

Morrison's method might be thought of as a North American variant of the magical realism that we have come to associate with Gabriel Garcia Marquez….North/South, black/white, these are the ingredients of Morrison's magical realism whose tension-fraught and unresolved juxtapositions articulate the continuation of domination in our society and the persistence of racism, and at the same time provoke Morrison's creative and critical imagination."

Susan Willis
"Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison"
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993) 309-10, 324-5

"Morrison demands that her work be judged according to Afro-American expressive criteria. Such comments from Morrison stand in direct contrast to statements by Ellison….Ellison denies an Afro-American literary family represented by Wright and Hughes in favor of a (white) Western ancestry characterized by Hemingway and Faulkner and predicated on what he considered to be the greater quality of their achievements as artists. He insists, then, that a common (Afro-American) culture background is not determinative of literary lineage. Unlike Ellison, Morrison rejects a (white) Western ancestry in favor of an (exclusively) Afro-American one. She strives to create not American or Western, but an identifiably Afro-American (or Black) Art…

Just as she refuses to voice assent to critical assessments of her work that judge it by (white) Western standards or compare it to that of white authors, so, too, does Morrison refuse to allow the white voice and perception of the primer to authorize or authenticate the supremely self-conscious example of Black Art that is *The Bluest Eye*….The differences between her views of Afro-American art and those of Ellison (and Baldwin) are evident not only in statements such as those cited above, but also in her depiction in *The Bluest Eye* of the dangers inherent in Afro-American acceptance of white standards [except when accepting a Nobel Prize]."

Michael Awkward
"'The Evil of Fulfillment': Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*"
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993) 180-81

"In Morrison's fiction, the larger divisions within a community are frequently represented through relationships between generations and contrasts between families [Morrison does not want to be compared to Faulkner, the subject of her M.A. thesis] In *The Bluest Eye*, the economically and emotionally bankrupt Breedloves are figuratively set against the intact MacTeer family; Mrs. MacTeer's grudging love for her daughters exposes the absence of such affection in Pauline Breedlove's attitude toward Pecola. The Peace

and Sabat matriarchies in *Sula* are developed through deliberate contrast; their different values shape Sula's and Nel's very different expectations for themselves….

Infantilized by their often marginal position in a strongly female world, most of the male characters in the novels remain 'Sons,' or boys, with indicative names like Tar Baby (in *Sula*), a man who can't give up the bottle—in this case, alcohol; and Boy Boy, Eva Peace's husband, who abandons her and their three small children for another woman. Even the little boy whom Sula inadvertently drowns has the diminutive name of Chicken Little. The men who actually couple with women are either ineffectual shadows, womanizers, or deserters: from the MacTeers' roomer in *The Bluest Eye*—Mr. Henry, who fraternizes with prostitutes and tries to fondle Frieda MacTeer—to the men of *Sula*—Helene Wright's husband, who vanishes, and Hannah's, who dies three years after siring Sula.

The one man whom Sula loves, Ajax, seems to diverge from this pattern; however, as soon as Ajax feels the tug toward permanence, he flees, afraid of relinquishing his maternally cushioned boyhood. Son, the central male character of *Tar Baby*, is an emotionally strong man. Yet his anomalous position is underscored by his status as a man on the lam—his wife's infidelity drove him to accidental homicide—who, finally, has no place to flee except into a legendary past. The young Milkman Dead of *Song of Solomon* is, for much of his childhood and youth, infantalized by his mother and indulged to the point of satiety by women who adore him and prostrate themselves on his behalf. Accustomed to receiving without giving, he is, like many of the males in Morrison's fiction, allowed to stretch his 'carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years.' At the same time he is belittled by his cold father and patronized or deeply resented by his elder female siblings, who loathe his privileged maleness….Morrison implies that if the enveloping white world does not emasculate or infantilize black men, it turns them into Macon Deads, imitators of the most deadening values of white patriarchal society: greed, acquisition, and dominion….

Both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are narratives of female education and concomitant loss of innocence. The metamorphoses in the lives of the several young girls of the two novels reverberate through the entire communities of which they are a part. In each novel, one female becomes an outcast against whom the group reasserts its values: each is viewed as 'evil' because she transgresses, whether willingly or not, the social and sexual mores of her community. *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* extend Morrison's exploration of the vital relationship between the individual and the group. However, in these latter narratives the conflict is dramatized through characters who bear their communities' moral and cultural contradictions more overly within themselves."

Roberta Rubenstein
"Pariahs and Community"
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (1993) 138, 140-41, 149

"Toni Morrison ranks among the most highly regarded and widely read fiction writers and cultural critics in the history of U.S. literature….Morrison enjoys such high regard and general esteem both in this country and internationally that she invites frequent comparison with the best-known writers of the American and European literary canons: William Faulkner, James Joyce, Thomas Hardy, and others…. Throughout the 1980s, *Song of Solomon* frequently featured prominently in critical studies of African American literature. Its popularity at that time was due, at least in part, to the ways that it addressed some of the prevailing concerns of that period of African American literary study: the critique of American individualism and northern migration, the apparent celebration of folk and oral culture, and the reclamation of African American history. One mark of the greatness of the novel has been its ability to respond to changes in critical concerns and preoccupations as they have evolved over time."

Valerie Smith, ed.
New Essays on Song of Solomon
(Cambridge U 1995) 15

"Toni Morrison's novels systematically interrogate a range of familial roles and representations…. Writing of the African American family of the 1970s and 1980s, however, means confronting not only the legacy of slavery and the distortions it performed on all intimate relationships but also the great social and economic pressure in the wake of Lyndon Johnson's 'Great Society.' It means confronting the stigma of the popularly acclaimed Moynihan report (1965) that labeled the black family a pathological 'matriarchy' and

failed to claim any public responsibility for the realities: massive unemployment and low pay for African American men and women, poor educational opportunities for black youth, the drug culture, and the resulting pressures placed on familial structures. Instead, Moynihan maintained, and others echoed, the black family's 'deterioration' could be explained by rampant sexual debauchery among the black population, by the instability and violence of black men, and by the pathological dominance of black women….African American masculinity is still too deeply threatened and endangered."

Marianne Hirsch
"Knowing Their Names: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*"
New Essays (1995) 70-71, 90

"Dorothea Drummond Mbalia's *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness* (1991), a Marxist interpretation of the novels that is influenced by Kwame Nkrumah, is the most controversial critical work on Morrison. Mbalia contends that in the first five novels Morrison demonstrates a continuously growing consciousness of capitalism as the most powerful and destructive of Western forces that oppress all peoples of African heritage and a movement toward Marxian ideology. Mbalia traces that development from Morrison's 'mistaken' explications of racism (*The Bluest Eye*) and gender (*Sula*) to a discovery of the importance of knowing family, community, and heritage (*Song of Solomon*) to class consciousness (*Tar Baby*) and finally to finding solutions to class exploitation and racial oppression (*Beloved*). The novels connect to one another through the 'African principles of collectivism, humanism, and egalitarianism.'

But while Mbalia accurately defines many central themes of Morrison's novels, Mbalia's approach does not adequately take into account the breadth of Morrison's imaginative powers. It is undeniable that Morrison is interested in black peoples across the globe and that she seeks to expose the racial, sexual, and class oppressions they suffer; but she also insists, explicitly and implicitly, orally and in her writings, that although her novels are political they are not prescriptive or ideologically bound. They are not sociological studies. For instance, it is not accurate to suggest, as Mbalia does, that Morrison derives her source material entirely from African and African-diaspora culture. Careful readings of Morrison's novels reveal her vast knowledge and use of African, American Indian, Oriental, and Euro-American cultural material. In all her writings Morrison successfully transcends the boundaries of an either-or framework in favor of the both-and framework that frees her imagination. An inflexible Marxist interpretation trivializes the scope of her accomplishments and contributions to black literature."

Nellie Y. McKay
Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison
eds. McKay and Kathryn Earle
(MLA 1997) 14-15

"In *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1991), Trudier Harris locates Morrison's art at the center of the black literary tradition. For more than a hundred years, many of the most renowned black writers, including Charles Chestnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison, have used the rich African American expressive culture as a creative source. The writers were fully aware that although literacy was denied to Africans and their descendants in America until well past the middle of the nineteenth century, an oral literature flourished among earlier generations in songs, folk rhymes, jokes, riddles, and tales. These black writers recognized the significance of the earlier forms by relying on them to give integrity to their written works. Morrison also makes extensive (although not exclusive) use of folklore as sources. Harris's book opens with a reminder that in 1984 Morrison commented that she was struggling to fashion an intrinsically black literature, one requisite of which is its combination of black oral and written expressions. She wants her work to cause the reader to listen to as well as read the words. Morrison has often spoken of seeking to effect a connection between the writing and the reader, somewhat like the connection between the audience and the black preacher when they participate in a sermon.

But Harris argues that Morrison does not consistently create parallels to historical black folklore materials in her work. More often, she transforms them into what the critic calls literary folklore: material that 'can be incorporated into literary texts without compromising its original quality.' In Harris's opinion Morrison, more than any other writer, uses folklore in a way that leaves 'no dichotomy between form and substance, theme and character.' Morrison's achievement raises a number of questions that Harris attempts to address….Harris concludes that Morrison's mastery of her craft enables Morrison to create materials that

so closely resemble the original forms that it is almost impossible to detect where communal memory ends and the artistic imagination takes over….Her study, informed by close, careful readings and a sound knowledge of the folklore of Afro-America and other cultures, is the best overall critical text to date for those who teach these novels."

McKay
Approaches (1997) 13-14

"*Toni Morrison's World of Fiction* (1993), by Karen Carmean, is a clearly written and comprehensible overview of Morrison's novels that teachers unfamiliar with the full body of Morrison's work should find useful. The introduction includes a helpful discussion of process in the artist's writings. Carmean stresses that Morrison's fundamental concern is language, especially the distinctive language of black people in relation to other aspects of black cultural aesthetics; Carmean notes, for example, that there are musical moments in each novel. In addition…Morrison's pervasive use of orality and her meticulous attention to detail suggest a similarity between her novels and Greek tragedy."

McKay
Approaches (1997) 12

"In a treatment of the six novels, *The Dilemma of Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison's Novels* (1993), Denise Heinze argues that Morrison seeks to resolve the tensions embedded in the double consciousness that W. E. B. Du Bois identified at the turn of the century as the heritage of all black people in America. The central issue for Heinze is Morrison's success as a great American writer who also preserves the integrity of blackness. On the one hand, a basher of many myths of Western culture, on the other a new mythmaker who creates meaning out of connections to the past and to spiritual love. Morrison has created novels that transform and embody two warring literary selves. Morrison's vision…combines political consciousness with aesthetic sensibility and elevates the beautiful and reclaimable in humanity. This book is useful for teachers interested in the conflicts black writers face as they engage their bicultural status and in the writers' responsibility to the white and black communities."

McKay
Approaches (1997) 14

"The writings of black women in America have recently gained great visibility in college and university classes in this country and abroad as many more teachers than ever, of various races and both genders, have become aware of the special qualities of these works. This trend began with the emergence in the 1960s and 1970s of writers like Maya Angelou, Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Toni Morrison, and Alive Walker and the recoveries of Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larson, and Ann Petry, among others. This effect on contemporary literature was evident by the late 1970s. Initially helped by the black and women's movements, black women writers have accrued not only popular appeal but also scholarly and academic prestige as a result of the more recent interest in multicultural education and diversity in the humanities curriculum….Most prominent among the black women's writings now used in classes are the novels of Toni Morrison….

The Bluest Eye (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992)….*The Bluest Eye*, not terribly well-received in the early 1970s, is now widely used in introductory and women's literature courses. It is perhaps Morrison's most accessible novel, though its nonlinear structure, graphic rape scene, poetic style, and female-bildungsroman form can make it difficult to teach, especially to male students. *The Bluest Eye* was followed by *Sula*, another female bildungsroman, whose eponymous heroine subverts convention and forces students to question their value systems. *Sula's* female-centered world can make male students uncomfortable. Although this novel rejects facile interpretation, students often try to impose a simplistic dichotomy of good and evil on it. With *Song of Solomon* Morrison proved that she could capably re-create male as well as female milieus. It is a rich and rewarding novel, but again it is demanding because of its multiplicity of cultural allusions and mixture of literary forms. The ending of *Song* always presents a problem for students, as it defies convention and frustrates the need for closure.

Tar Baby, set in the Caribbean and prominently featuring whites as well as blacks, is atypical of Morrison's work. This novel invites questions of race, heritage, and identity through the contrasts it depicts.

Although students may find its plainer style more accessible, it appears to be almost nobody's favorite. Many critics consider it Morrison's most undervalued work. *Beloved* is arguably Morrison's most complex novel….*Beloved* forces students to accept the impossible as commonplace, and most find it a challenge to grapple with the palimpsest quality of the narrative. Finally, *Jazz* reconfigures fictional boundaries and represents a departure into a type of interdisciplinary fiction that incorporates many fields besides history. Its integration of jazz style and jazz themes demands a familiarity with a musical realm far removed from the experience of most students and therefore presents a particular challenge to instructors….

She does not subscribe to traditional feminist ideology. Similarly, she rejects a black nationalism that dispenses easy answers to difficult questions regarding the human condition….Morrison returns time and again to examine the subtle ways in which the presence and language of blackness, though the presence was stubbornly ignored and the language was often unspoken, influence American literature from the eighteenth century on….Her concern is to subvert a polite literary criticism that refuses to see the richness and complexities in American literature and to activate another that will not be afraid to face 'the disrupting darkness' of the Africanist presence in its midst."

McKay
Approaches (1997) 3-5, 7

"In *The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* (1989), Terry Otten traces the evolution and the varied uses of the Fall motif in Morrison's first five novels. He examines the complex imagery of the garden in her work and uses that myth to depict the fall and transcendence of her black protagonist in a white world. The novels share several themes: 'the passage from innocence to experience, the quest for identity, the ambiguity of good and evil, the nature of the divided self, and especially, the concept of a fortunate fall.' These themes make Morrison's works universal and endow her characters with symbolic dimensions inside an integrating pattern. Doubtless, teachers interested in the Fall motif will find reasons in this book to apply it to *Jazz* as well."

Nellie Y. McKay
Approaches (1997) 15

"Toni Morrison has frequently discussed the type of participatory reading that her novels are crafted to encourage….Morrison's self-conscious disposition as an artist opposes the standard view of a reading process in which the reader tries to discover the meaning that the author has carefully hidden in the text. Morrison instead envisions the author and the reader as partners in the dialectical creation of the text and of its meanings, a relation derived from call-and-response forms characteristic of African diaspora oral traditions, particularly in music. Call-and-response structures, inherent in spirituals, the blues, sermons, folktales, and so on, anticipate and require a response that may extend, challenge, revise, clarify, or transform any previous utterance, and they outline a generative sequence in which the response becomes the new call. These structures delineate a performance environment in which creative responsibilities are shared between the lead speaker or singer and the audience, allowing all attentive or informed listeners to become involved."

Judylyn S. Ryan
"Morrison's *Jazz*: 'A Knowing So Deep'"
Approaches (1997) 154

"If we think of Toni Morrison's work on a continuum from *Sula* (1974), where she begins the transformation of woman from human being to something other than human and where she experiments with sentience beyond death, through *Tar Baby* (1981), with its talking trees and butterflies, then *Beloved* (1987), with its emphasis on the temporal transcendence of the grave, is a natural extension of those ideas. The ancient tree mothers who would claim Jadine as their sister by drowning her in tar if necessary are not so far removed from the single-mindedness of Beloved, who would kill Sethe as quickly as she would claim her as mother. In exploring the novel's basis in folk traditions, some prevailing ideas about the female body, especially those grounded in myth and fear, are especially illuminating….

The world view in *Sula* prepares us for the seeming topsy-turviness of *Tar Baby*, with its racing blind horsemen and mythic life forms, for the otherworldliness represented by Pilate's lack of a navel in *Song of Solomon*, and for the emphasis on the temporal transcendence of the grave in *Beloved*. Remember, too, that

Eva talks to Plum about his death (he comes back to tell her things) and that Valerian sees Michael's ghost in the dining room on the night that Son intrudes into the island world. Morrison has well prepared her readers, therefore, for complete suspension of disbelief in the human and natural worlds. The female body reduced to desire makes Sula kindred in spirit and objective to Beloved. Consider, too, that Ajax, Sula's lover, leaves her when he begins to fear her body as woman, when he judges that she wants to trap him into marriage, or at least domesticity. Woman's body is a threat to men in *Beloved* as well; that is the vantage point from which we see what happens in the novel. Paul D's arrival at Sethe's house brings with it the ancient fear of women."

Trudier Harris
"*Beloved*: Woman, Thy Name is Demon"
Toni Morrison's Beloved: *A Casebook*
eds. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay
(Oxford 1999) 127, 130

"Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, John Edgar Wideman, and Ishmael Reed have found subjects in Afro-American life, but that segment is crumbling, also, into every smaller units; so that there is hardly a large entity such as 'Afro-American life' anymore: only isolated subcultures, some of which speak different languages. Where does the Afro-American writer seeking the broader world, like Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*, go or fit in?…

More than nearly any other emerging and significant writer of the last quarter of a century, Morrison has bathed in a glowing reception. *Time* and *Newsweek*…called her a 'terrific storyteller' and deemed *Song of Solomon* 'both a private and a national heritage'—comparing it to *Roots*. *The Times Book Review*, the [politically correct] bellwether of how a novelist is to be treated, said *Song* 'impresses itself upon us like a love affair,' a comment more suitable for a Harlequin romance than for a novel in which many of the characters are called 'Dead.' The *Washington Post*, in a burst of idiocy unusual even for reviewers, called the novel the 'most substantial fiction since *Invisible Man*,' which means that in the twenty-five years between the novels, we can ignore…all of Pynchon, all of Bellow, all of Barth and Roth.

The New Yorker, which in those days disliked adventurous novels but liked 'a good read,' called *Song* 'a domestic epic—a rhapsodic work…it billows.' For the first time, a novel is compared to a sail. The Book-of-the-Month Club News qualifies *Song* as 'the best novel of the black experience in America' since Ellison. That sidesteps the fact that Ellison, while focusing on the black experience, was writing about all America, regardless of color, and it was that reach which gave his novel such force and intensity. The critic in the daily *Times* found it a 'privilege to review,' and the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* found it the most moving novel 'I have read in ten years of reviewing,' which begs the question of what the reviewer has been reviewing.

How do we get past this hype, much of it doing a terrible disservice to Morrison, since it moves her into realms where she is not 'read,' but adored. She must be read. And she must be read freshly, anew, without all that terrible baggage of blurbs, hype, adoration. She has, indeed, carved out her own territory, part of it embedded in a personalized, lyrical language and part in her use of an overriding metaphor: that the black experience holds a community together, even while individual lives within it do not cohere. She has, in effect, created a tension between community among blacks and an opposing force, individual blacks who cannot be contained. She has opened up the very paradoxes of a culture.

This differs from white subcultures in several respects, not least because whites increasingly do not possess community values, or need them in the same degree, and their individuals have no rootedness, no place of their own. [Speak for yourself, New Yorker] Blacks, on the contrary, extend help to each other, throw out lifelines in the wake of white intransigence or sheer meanness. When Morrison departs from this scheme, which has considerable resonance, she wavers….

Henry Louis Gates, who is rapidly losing his standing as a serious critic in his rush to cheer on, has created a kind of literary monster in Morrison, while ostensibly praising her. By analogizing her to everyone from Duke Ellington and Maria Callas to Faulkner, Marquez, and Virginia Woolf, Gates has created meaningless comparisons. Because she calls a book *Jazz* she is not Duke Ellington; because she

sings, she is not Maria Callas (nor Luciano Pavorotti); because she displays technical mastery, she is not Faulkner or Woolf or Marquez. These are all different orders of being, and Gates traduces them by linking them in this offhand, blurby manner."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 20, 138-39

"Whites and American institutions are stigmatized as racist until they prove otherwise…Whites know on some level that they are stigmatized by their skin color alone, that the black people they meet may suspect them of being racist simply because they are white. And American institutions, from political parties and corporations to art museums and private schools, not only declare their devotion to diversity but also use racial preferences to increase the visibility of minorities so as to refute the racist stigma. Surely genuine goodwill may also be a part of such efforts. But the larger reality is that white guilt leaves no room for moral choice; it does not depend on the good will or the genuine decency of people. It depends on their fear of stigmatization, their fear of being called a racist."

Shelby Steele
black conservative
White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era
(Harper/Perennial 2007) 27

Michael Hollister (2014)