

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF TONI MORRISON

(1931-2019)

"Toni Morrison has a distinction beyond her Nobel prize in literature: she is one of the most frequently assigned modern writers in college English courses. Well-regarded writers often shape the standards of literate expression in their time, especially if aspiring young men and women encounter their books during the impressionable years of college.

There was a time when nearly every man who went to college wanted to sound like Hemingway. Studiously plain English. Very short sentences. And lots of *ands*. And emotion held in reserve. The enchantments of other writers have been more fleeting. For a while, creative writing students wanted dearly to sound like Raymond Carver, whose hyper-minimalism left many of us aching for a good old adjective or two. For several seemingly interminable decades, students in the social sciences inexplicably strove to write English modeled on bad translations of incomprehensible French theorists. The style was perfected by Judith Butler, author of *Gender Trouble*, who gained immortality of a sort for her 1999 first-place finish in the Bad Writing Contest held by the journal *Philosophy and Literature*...

Gone are the days when students yearned to command the stylistic muscle of Addison, the authority of Johnson, the fullness of Gibbon--or the wry voice of Twain. But never mind. We have Morrison. Of course, some of our readers were no doubt set in their ways before Morrison's *Beloved* (1988) came along to open up new possibilities of English expression. You are asking yourself, 'Is it too late for me? Is there any hope that I can catch that special cadence, that artful style that will, you know, make me sound all wise 'n stuff?' It is not too late. As a public service, we offer a primer on how to write the Morrison way. We will be using Morrison's brand-new novel, *A Mercy*, as our primary text. To get started, let's look at the opening sentences of the first paragraph:

"Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark--weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more--but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I explain. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays on the steam of a kettle. Or when a corn-husk doll sitting on a shelf is soon splaying in the corner of a room and the wicked of how it got there is plain. Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know."

To write the Morrison way, you have to pay attention to details. A less artful writer, for example, would have said '*despite* what I've done' in that second sentence, 'in spite of' implying some spitefulness to be overcome. So, as a first lesson, *misuse common phrases*. That will build trust with your readers who want their authors to meet them on the common ground of casual verbiage.

These opening sentences, as we soon learn, are the words or the thoughts of Florens, a slave somewhere around what is now New Jersey in 1690. She addresses a free Negro blacksmith with whom she is enamored. We might therefore expect some attempt to capture a dialect characteristic of the time and place. That's, of course, what a lesser writer would do. Morrison instead gives us a voice that slides around from advanced English syntax to folksy illiteracy. Second lesson: *Embrace inconsistency*. This will force your readers to think. Florens refers somewhat oddly to her 'telling' in that second sentence, while also promising to 'lie quietly.' Can she do both? ('Telling' becomes Florens' abiding concern in the novel, her word for bearing witness.)

Embracing inconsistency need not, however, require you to compose self-contradictory sentences. You can achieve the effect in simpler ways, as for example, just by leaving words out. Florens says, 'I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth.' Fully spelled out that would be 'to bare my teeth,' but how much more force is achieved by truncation. 'To rise up and bare teeth' becomes a single action, like 'rise

and shine!' By using verbs as nouns ('my telling') and mixing up other parts of speech, you can create a veil of mystery. Note how 'wicked,' which is usually an adjective, gets mysteriously transformed into an ominous abstract noun in 'the wicked of how it got there is plain.' A couple of paragraphs later we have 'My head is light with confusion of two things, hunger for you and *scare* if I am lost.' Elsewhere, 'Still it is the continue of all misery.' One more short lesson, and then we will be ready for a little exercise. It is important to indicate the speaker's self-consciousness by inserting numerous little declarations, e.g., 'Don't be afraid,' 'I explain,' 'You know. I know you know.'

Let's see if we can put our new understanding of how to write the Morrison way to work. Here's the lead paragraph from the Sunday *New York Times* front page story, headlined 'World Leaders Vow Joint Push to Aid Economy': Facing the gravest economic crisis in decades, the leaders of 20 countries agreed Saturday to work together to revive their economies, but they put off thornier decisions about how to overhaul financial regulations until next year, providing a serious early challenge for the Obama administration. Remember the rules: (1) Misuse common phrases, (2) Embrace inconsistency, (3) Omit words to create more forceful expression, (4) Mix up parts of speech, and (5) Chop in self-conscious micro-sentences.

Here's the *New York Times* paragraph Morrison-ized: 'Their facing of Saturday graves upon graves of crisis, the leaders of 20 countries agreed to work and revive their economies but put off the thornier of how to haul over financial regulations until, next year, when the Obama administration is challenged.' We explain. These simple rules can be applied to almost anything you might care to write. Until you are fluent in Morrisonian, I recommend that you practice by translating your regular writing into this more compelling style. Consider for example the ordinary office memo: 'Just to remind you, I will be out of the office Tuesday to meet with our supplier, Acme Explosives. Please finish your work on the 2Q budget and let the account rep know that Mr. Coyote's order will be shipped Thursday.' Morrisonized: 'The reminding can't wait the hurry of it. I explain. I know you know of Tuesday, I and Acme Explosives is soon together meet. You can please work, perhaps, the budget's second quarter, and knowledge the account rep of Mr. Coyote's Thursday shipment.'

Once you have mastered these basics, you will be ready for some more advanced lessons. Morrison is our undisputed master of wandering verb tenses: 'So when I set out to find you, she and Mistress give me Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl.' Her character Florens seems addicted to progressive verbs: 'What I am wanting to tell her,' 'I am never hearing how they once talk,' and 'I am remembering what you tell me.' This may sound a bit like 'black English,' but the character in whose mouth Morrison puts these verb forms doesn't speak any known dialect. Rather, Morrison creates a linguistic mash-up for her, composed of sonorities from the King James Bible, daytime TV bromides, and a touch here and there of Uncle Remus. Morrison knows how deftly to insert evocative foreign terms: 'My mother, a *minha mãe*, is frowning...' (*Minha mãe* is Portuguese for 'my mother,' and is also a category of voodoo spirit).

Morrison is a free spirit when it comes to interpreting the past and is not bogged down by petty concern with historical accuracy. This applies to matters large and small. Whole characters seem to have dropped back in time from the twenty-first century. But it is the anachronistic little details that are Morrison's signature. My favorite occurs late in the book: 'Ice-coated starlings clung to branches drooping with snow.' This is the 1690s, two centuries before the eccentric bird lover Eugene Schiffelin introduced starlings to the U.S. by releasing sixty of them in Central Park. Schiffelin had no idea how the birds would proliferate, crowd out native species, and form enormous squawking, twittering, whistling flocks that seem to fill up whole forests. Starlings seem to propagate as fast as clichés and to descend like clouds of effusive blurbs on overpraised books. Morrison's error in putting them back in the seventeenth century is, of course, charming. The Latin Americans have their magical realism. We have our answer in Morrison's historical irrationalism, a poetic patois highly suitable for de-imagining the past."

Peter Wood
"You Too Can Write Like Toni Morrison!"
nas.org (17 November 2008)

Beloved, first paragraph: "124 was spiteful. Full of baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her

daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old--as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door-sill. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods: the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. No. Each one fled at once--the moment the house committed what was for them the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. Within two months, in the dead of winter, leaving their grandmother, Baby Suggs; Sethe, their mother; and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone Road. It didn't have a number then, because Cincinnati didn't stretch that far. In fact, Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them."

"Right away, the reader is snatched into the home at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. With no forewarning, the reader is brought into the story not expecting the conflicts to be shown, although not clear, within the first page of the novel. Everything is a mystery; there are so many questions: Why is 124 (which we shall presume to be a house upon the first reading) so spiteful and so full of baby's venom? Why would a baby even have venom? What did Howard and Buglar run away from exactly? Where is the proper introduction? Why can't my questions be answered already?"

Evoking questions from the reader so early in the novel achieves one of Morrison's many purposes. As stated in the foreword of the book she 'wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book's population--just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defense' (xviii). With just that, no preparation or defense, Morrison takes us into the home of Sethe, a runaway slave made to live in a house haunted by the spirit of her dead daughter and ridden with the regret for settling for just the word 'Beloved' on the child's tombstone.

With incomplete sentences, several instances of misplaced punctuation, and an unorthodox introduction, Morrison seldom follows any of the conventional rules for novel writing. The prose is characterized by short phrases like 'Full of baby's venom' and 'Twenty years. A life time' (28), placed in paragraphs to fool readers to believe they are perfectly suitable sentences. It is also composed of what were formerly two words that have now been written as one, including 'whitewoman,' 'Redmen,' and 'coloredpeople.' Morrison's stylistic prose suggests that the mere adjectives of the individuals engulf them entirely and become their identities. This characteristic suits the time period of the story, because in the days of slavery and racial discrimination, a man could be no more than his color to the world.

The writing style of Toni Morrison is simple, but deviant from that of comparable contemporary writers. She leaves no time for readers to become acquainted with her characters and, without any written sign of hesitation, introduces them to the strange circumstances of the plot and her peculiar prose. What at first appears to be a simplistic form of writing is actually a more complex, premeditated style. The prose of *Beloved* is parallel to the dialect of its characters and the structure of the plot (such as the absence of a more ordinary introduction) correlates with the occurrences in the characters' lives. Real life seldom happens in an organized fashion and Morrison's prose likewise does not follow any standards.

Slowly but surely, I am getting used to Morrison's odd style. I will admit I did have to reread these first 33 pages in order to fully comprehend the action in the plot. For example, upon my first reading I missed the eagerness in Paul D's eyes when Sethe invited him to stay. I also misunderstood the description of the scars on Sethe's back, which although referred to as a chokecherry tree are just a bit of dead skin caused by a beating. I can't wait to see if Paul D will prove Baby Suggs' old saying true, that 'a man ain't nothing but a man' (26), or if he will be an exception and actually stick around 124."

"The Introduction: A First Look at the Writing Style of Toni Morrison"
124-was-spiteful.blogspot.com (21 November 2009)

"Morrison's writings concentrate on rural Afro-American communities and on their cultural inheritance, which she explores with cold-blooded detail and vivid vocabulary. Her intricate writing style does not just tell the reader about issues concerning African-Americans; instead she shows them. In *Beloved*, set in Ohio and on a plantation in Kentucky, Morrison shows slavery through flashbacks and stories told by characters. Her word choices give the reader the sense of how slave masters viewed their slaves as savage animals.... "Vivid dialogue, capturing the drama and extravagance of black speech, gives way to an impressionistic evocation of physical pain or an ironic, essay-like analysis of the varieties of religious hypocrisy"--Margo Jefferson (*Newsweek*). "[Morrison] works her magic charm above all with a love of language. Her...style carries you like a river, sweeping doubt and disbelief away, and it is only gradually that one realizes her deadly serious intent"--Susan Lydon (*Village Voice*)."

"Morrison's Writing Style"
umich.edu

The structure of the work is compounded with an ever-switching point of view. Every character, even the dead ones and half-alive ones, tell parts of the tale. At one point, Paul D and Sethe exchange flashbacks that finally meld into one whole (chapter 2). At another, the point of view switches off between four white people, who unreservedly show the biased point of view of some men who view slaves as tamed animals. The diversity of the point of view creates a tapestry of people who interact--individuals joined by past or present into a community.

Morrison's use of both *verse* and *stream of consciousness* writing where necessary is unsurpassed and not often matched in literature. Strict narrative, she realizes, is not enough to capture the feelings of a people, and she manages to capture them in some of the most well-known passages of modern literature. Finally, her use of objective correlativism should be noted. The use of Biblical allusions and much ambiguous symbolism creates an atmosphere riddled with force and drama. *Beloved* is meant to be more than a story--it is a history, and it is a life."

"*Beloved*: Writing Style"
homework-online.com

"Morrison's novel appears straightforward at first glance, opening with blank verse in a standard prose narration, but over the course of the story the style varies to contain differing levels of imagery and metaphor, as well as changes in tense, changes in register, free indirect discourse, stream-of-consciousness narration, shifting levels of language in terms of description and dialogue, and a combination of personification and repetition to solidify the characterization of an inanimate object.

When the novel opens, before Paul D makes his entrance, we are introduced to five characters: Sethe, her living daughter Denver, the ghost of her deceased daughter Beloved, her deceased mother-in-law Baby Suggs, and the house they live in, 124. Morrison uses personification to give the house its own identity: '124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom,' as if the house itself could feel spite. Morrison's use of repetition builds upon this personification of the house to strengthen the character of 124 as well as to provide a framework structure for the three parts of the novel as a whole. '124 was loud,' we are told at the beginning of part two, and '124 was quiet' at the beginning of part three--so there is a gradual taming of the house to run parallel to a solidification, in flesh, of the spirit of Beloved herself, from something 'spiteful' being 'toned down' to something 'quiet.' Repetition, furthermore, is used throughout the novel to strengthen and categorize the essence of these characters: Baby Suggs is consistently referred to as 'holy' while Paul D is 'the last of the Sweet Home men,' and Sweet Home itself is embodied with almost as much character as 124, but, unlike 124, it is not personified; where Sweet Home was a place where things happened, 124 is a place that makes things happen: 124 controls the qualities it possesses--spite, volume--it throws people out of its doors, it affects strangers who enter it, and it warns any unfamiliar person who comes near to turn away.

The characterization of the humans in the story is somewhat more straightforward, achieved through dialogue and the level of language used by each character, as well as the level of language used to describe each character, and by way of free indirect discourse and other techniques such as change in register and stream-of-consciousness narration. Baby Suggs, for instance, being deceased before the story even begins, is characterized in flashback almost entirely through a combination of her dialogue and through the way

other characters remember her. She speaks in short, clipped sentences that often double-back and repeat: 'In this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder do they flay it.' Later, in a flashback sequence in which Baby Suggs seeks employment, she says: 'Where is this here slaughterhouse?' and when asked what kinds of shoes she can repair she says, 'New, old, anything.' Her short sentences reveal a confident character, self-assured and able to handle herself, who, when in the company of others, becomes almost prophet-like in light of the wisdom she dispenses with such certainty and conviction that those characters around her--and, by extension, we ourselves--cannot help but agree with her when she continues: 'Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them....You got to love it, you!'

Stylistically, Morrison opts not to develop Baby Suggs' character through blank prose, with a third-person narrator noting that Baby Suggs is wise, or respected, or impassioned, or even 'holy.' Instead, she uses dialogue to convey these character traits--demonstrating rather than spelling them out--and, in addition, the level of language used by Baby Suggs also plays a role in this development. We can tell that although she is wise, the style of her dialogue and the words she uses are not those of a well-educated woman. Imagery and metaphor also play strong roles in the novel, most often reflecting the attitudes or feelings of the characters. Consider the scene in which Denver's tooth comes out. Beloved asks her why she doesn't cry. Ultimately, Denver does cry--but, we understand, she is not crying for the lost tooth; instead she is crying for the presence of Paul D in her house and the change in character on the part of her mother, and the relationship that has been spawned between the two of them. And as Denver cries, 'the couple upstairs, united, didn't hear a sound, but below them, outside, all around 124 the snow went on and on and on. Piling itself, burying itself. Higher. Deeper.'

The imagery of snow represents the onset of winter, of cold and isolation, and it reflects the tears of Denver, as well as the tears that 124 would shed, too, if it were a living entity. Consider also the variation in the length of sentences, with the first sentence comprised of a half-dozen clauses, and the last two sentences comprised of only fragments, in order to reflect the drawn-out weeping and the sharp sudden intakes of breath that occur in the act of crying, so as to represent, stylistically and through use of rhythm and sentence trajectory, the anguish of Denver, in words. Likewise, Sethe's anguish for her lost grandmother and for the deceased Baby Suggs is represented by use of liquid imagery: '[Sethe's] mother and Nan were together from the sea....A mighty wish for Baby Suggs broke over her like surf. In the quiet following its splash, Sethe looked at the two girls sitting by the stove: her sickly, shallow-minded boarder, her irritable, lonely daughter. They seemed little and far away' as if they were on an island and Sethe was drifting away from them, with the water imagery standing in place of the tears she cannot shed and the ocean between her present life and her past. So, when she finally tells the girls that 'Paul D [will] be here in a minute,' we know, from the imagery conveyed to us once again by free indirect discourse, that she is not really speaking to them about Paul D, but rather, she is speaking to herself in such a way as to put her mind off the subject of her thoughts and to focus on the here-and-now, to avoid the anguish that the past brings with it.

All of these techniques--free indirect discourse, variations in the length of sentences, use of a 'lower' level of language, and repetition--combine in the scene where Paul D changes his mind about Sethe, after he has been visited by Stamp Paid. 'The prickly, mean-eyed Sweet Home girl he knew as Halle's girl was obedient (like Halle), shy (like Halle), and work-crazy (like Halle).' Free indirect discourse allows us to see the kind of person Sethe once was. In this way she is characterized by the use of blank prose that Morrison neglected to use in the characterization of Baby Suggs, but this free indirect discourse also characterizes Paul D himself. 'This here Sethe was new'--the level of language is again 'low.' Yet the subject of it--the ability to distinguish between 'this here new Sethe' and the Sethe he remembers--implies wisdom and insight. The language used in this passage is not of the highest order, but the tone of the passage--which reflects on Sethe's capacity for love and her affection for her children--reveals two characters, Sethe and Paul D alike, who are able to overcome the shortcomings of their language by using the reasonable sensibilities of their minds.

One of the most drastic stylistic techniques Morrison uses originates subtly, with a change in tense, then progresses more drastically to a change in register, and culminates in a complete stylistic overhaul in which

blank prose is replaced with four stream-of-consciousness passages, with Sethe and Denver narrating one each, while Beloved narrates the remaining two. As with the free indirect discourse passage in which we peer into Paul D's mind, as above, these stream-of-consciousness passages serve to characterize each of the women speaking them, as well as each woman's relationship with the other characters in the novel, in such a way as to be unaffected by a third-person narrator who may favor one character over another. The tone of these passages, therefore, is brutally honest: not always flattering, not always straightforward, and sometimes what is really meant is not always what is thought by the characters who are speaking--but, knowing what we do about who they are, where they come from and what they want, the contradictions and self-delusions in their thoughts allow us to see the real truth behind their words. The change in tense comes after Denver sees the white dress kneeling with her mother. Once again, Morrison uses free indirect discourse, this time to establish the following scene by allowing us to glimpse Denver's concern for Beloved without explicitly showing us: '[Denver] was certain that Beloved was the white dress that had knelt with her mother in the keeping room, the true-to-life presence of the baby that had kept her company most of her life. And to be looked at by her, however briefly, kept her grateful for the rest of the time when she was merely the looker.'

Then, with Denver's concerns established, the tense changes from past to present: 'This day they are outside. It's cold and the snow is hard as packed dirt...Beloved is holding her arms steady while Denver unclasp frozen underwear and towels from the line.' The events that are written of in present tense contrast with the past-tense events that have taken place up to this point, and they are given a greater sense of immediacy as a result. This is particularly effective given the subject of these present tense scenes: that is, Denver's worry that Beloved will 'cross over' back to the 'other side': 'Don't,' she is saying between tough swallows. 'Don't. Don't go back.' The switch to present tense takes Denver's despair to its emotional extremities: 'This is worse than when Paul D came to 124 and she cried helplessly into the stove. This is worse. Then it was for herself. Now she is crying because she has no self--as opposed to a past tense variation on that despair, which would imply that it has already been overcome. In this passage, too, free indirect discourse is once again very much at the heart of its effectiveness. But the negative emotional extremity of the passage is inverted by the end--despair becomes joy and '[Beloved] is smiling again'--and by maintaining the present tense, that smile is more immediate and more resonant than one in the past.

Later, this same sense of immediacy comes by way of an abrupt change in register, in which the narrative switches from a somewhat subjective third-person point-of-view that tells us '[Sethe] needn't have worried [about losing time]' to Sethe's own mind, 'busy with the things she could forget.' Sethe's thoughts are presented not quite via free indirect discourse (for it is clearly not a third-person narrator relaying them to us as if we were in Sethe's shoes) yet also not quite via stream-of-consciousness prose (for although they reflect Sethe's thoughts, they do not reflect her thought processes): 'Thank God I don't have to remember or say a thing because you know it. All. You know I never would a left you. Never. It was all I could think of to do.' As with the previous passage, this passage also finds its power in the present tense--'Now all I see is their backs walking down the railroad tracks. Away from me'--as well as in the unbridled machinations of Sethe's mind; she does not keep any secrets at bay, for these are her own thoughts and she cannot keep secrets from herself. The change in register allows for a greater sense of honest communication between the narrator--in this instance, Sethe--and the reader, for we know that when Sethe recalls these events she is not filtering them in any way so as to protect Denver from the truth, but is instead recalling them as best she knows how; therefore we witness not only the events as she recalls them, but also their effect on her in a psychological sense rather than simply a behavioral one.

This progression from a simple change in tense to a semi-stream-of-consciousness insight into Sethe's thoughts reaches a peak in the aforementioned stream-of-consciousness passages narrated by Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. These, in turn, allow for a comparison and contrast among the three women to allow us a greater insight into how Beloved's return has affected each of them in its own particular way. The stream-of-consciousness narrations open windows into the minds of the various characters so we may see the things they would never say aloud as well as the things they cannot say aloud. Consider Sethe's narration in which she says: 'Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing.' The tone of this claim is forceful, yet somewhat hedonistic, and it reveals Sethe's conscious thoughts with regard to Beloved--that she is her daughter, that she owns her--as well as her subconscious thoughts that Sethe herself does not say aloud--that she still does not know

why *Beloved* came back to her, and that she hungers for an explanation, even though she says otherwise. Denver's narration, on the other hand, is less self-deluding and more 'on-the-nose:' 'I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it.' Her thoughts reflect the clear-cut, straightforward thoughts of a youth, and, as with the stream-of-consciousness passages narrated by Sethe and by *Beloved*, they strengthen Denver's character as well as her relationship to the other two women without tainting it by having any other character intrude upon her thoughts.

The stream-of-consciousness passages, in general, allow for a clear and pure insight into the characters and their relationships. The style of the novel, if it is varied and in some instances inconsistent, is only as varied and inconsistent as the characters themselves and the relationships they share. There is a complicated world and we are plunged head-first into a story whose roots lie buried deep in the past and whose effects provoke a different response from each character; therefore, Morrison's use of repetition and change in tense are necessary to explore the roots of that story, while her use of shifting levels of language and personification establish her characters, and thereafter her use of imagery and metaphor physically reflect the effects the events of the story have on her characters, and her use of change in register and free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness narration reflect the innermost thoughts of those characters in a more direct way, unguarded and untouched by anything artificial that an external narrator would necessarily bring to the table. Morrison's use of such a wide array of stylistic techniques is comparable in scope to the scope of her narrative and its players, and as such it has the effect of not only constantly developing those characters throughout the novel, but also of intrinsically weaving their thoughts and their essences, their personalities and their strengths and weaknesses, into the very fabric of this narrative."

"The Shifting Prose Style in *Beloved*"
gradefixer.com (15 June 2018)

"Novel after novel has proved to be not just a best seller but has continued to challenge society's norms and pillars. With her stellar ability to tell stories, she has time after time enthralled her readers with her repertoire of techniques like her epistolary form of writing, use of Bakhtinian principles among others.... According to the *Paris Review*, Toni Morrison detests being called a *poetic writer* because she seems to think it marginalizes her and denies her story power and resonance. And this is indeed true, her writing possesses an unconventional depth that is rarely seen in anyone. Her ability to provide bits and pieces of each story through multiple narratives is another thing that separates her from other storytellers and makes her a class apart. She uses vivid imagery, and a gothic element in order to show her readers the effect that slavery had on the lives of black people....

Toni Morrison's techniques make it difficult for a reader to put [a] book down. Her psycho-narrative exploration of the characters is also significant, as readers are given an insight into the characters' feelings and emotions. Toni Morrison, in her novels, uses numerous techniques, and these do not just make her books a must read but also a wonderful learning process. Her characters are very much like the philosopher Michael Bakhtian said characters should be....She uses the technique of dialogism, ensuring that her characters transmit their own voices and opinions; the narrator isn't omnipresent and telling the readers what they need to know. This ensures that we learn about the characters on our own and understand them and their actions at our own pace."

Ashwath Narayanan
"Toni Morrison's Powerful Style of Writing"
theodysseyonline.com (19 December 2018)

"'It was a fine cry--loud and long--but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.' That's the last line of novelist Toni Morrison's 1973 book *Sula*....In a 2003 profile, Hilton Als described Morrison's prose as 'conducted in high style.' Margalit Fox's obituary in *The New York Times* expands on that point: Ms. Morrison animated...reality in a style resembling that of no other writer in English. Her prose, often luminous and incantatory, rings with the cadences of black oral tradition. Her plots are dreamlike and nonlinear, spooling backward and forward in time as though characters bring the entire weight of history to bear on their every act. Her narratives mingle the voices of men, women, children and even ghosts in layered polyphony. Myth, magic and superstition are inextricably intertwined

with everyday verities, a technique that caused Ms. Morrison's novels to be likened often to those of Latin American magic realist writers like [Gabriel García Márquez.]"

Bianca Martin
"Visionary: Toni Morrison"
the1a.org (8 August 2019)

"Again and again, when I think of Morrison's legacy, I think of what she described in her 1993 Nobel laureate speech as 'the measure of our lives'--language. At least part of this association is because when I was in college, I was given the miserable assignment of writing a pastiche of Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*. 'Style is born from the idea that the writer is trying to express,' our syllabus helpfully informed those of us about to set out on such an ambitious task. 'That style cannot be separated from thought and content and is indeed a reflection of them--that is the founding precept of this course.'

It was my first time reading Morrison, and under the most intimidating of circumstances--to try to imitate the inimitable. Being a literature major, I knew going in, of course, who Morrison was; along with Phillip Roth, who was still alive at the time, she was often described as being the greatest living American author. Still, I wasn't prepared for *The Bluest Eye*'s opening. It remains my favorite among her works, a sort of devolution of a child's reading exercise. 'Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door...' becomes in the next paragraph 'Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door...', which in the next is the babble of 'Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddoor...'

Then comes that flooring proclamation in the voice of the novel's narrator and that, in its first edition, was printed right on the cover: "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow...*" Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* at the age of 39 in 1970, and would go on to write 10 more novels in her life, the most recent in 2015. Many of her other books are more highly regarded than *The Bluest Eye*: *Song of Solomon* is an oft-cited favorite, and *Beloved* is perhaps the best known thanks to its Oprah Winfrey boost. In her own foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison expressed authorial dissatisfaction with the book, noting she'd observed "many readers remained touched but not moved."

But during those few weeks that I obsessively poured over *The Bluest Eye*, creasing the cover in my efforts to extract the key to cribbing Morrison's style, I was moved. By Pecola's story, yes, but also by the way Morrison fitted her words together to create images both in my mind and--in a way I still don't fully understand--in my heart. Sometimes it was as simple as a perfect simile that would ring, almost musically, on the page. 'She left me the way people leave a hotel room,' begins one passage. 'Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires,' goes another. Still others are simple and still: love is as 'thick and dark as Alaga syrup,' teeth are 'stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips,' and nuns 'go by as quiet as lust.'

Then there are Morrison's long passages of dialogue, which sometimes run on unbroken by the signifier of 'he said' or 'she said.' Even her most minor characters' commentaries are used to ground the narrative in a tradition that is distinctly more oral than the rest of her prose. 'My choices of language...are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture,' is how Morrison describes her effort in the foreword. Children are given children's voices ('she's ministratin'), and the prose is often shaken by the devastating simplicity of their colloquial observations ('Nobody's father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too').

I can't remember anything about how my pastiche eventually turned out--no doubt it was an embarrassingly clumsy attempt to replicate the way Morrison slices straight through the distractions of language that bog the rest of us down in the act of what Oprah calls 'truth-telling.' Morrison's abilities, after all, transcended the sort of stylistic language that can be palely mimicked. Her novels cut with urgency because of the content driving the style to begin with, content that is often dark and reckoning, and that most writers aren't brave enough to look at straight on.

Only years later did I stumble on Morrison's interview 'The Art of Fiction,' in which she says 'it is what you don't write that frequently gives what you do write its power.' And that, I think, is the key I'd been

looking for, but could never myself have fit into the lock. Not many can because, for Morrison, 'language' isn't as simple as what gets printed. It is also what has been lived, what has been felt, and what lies, slick and sharp as a trap, between those glorious words."

Jeva Lange
"Toni Morrison's Legacy of Language"
the week.com

"Toni Morrison's writing style is very unique, and it adds a lot of depth to her novels. Her uses of biblical references, characters, and how she divides up her novels creates and draws her audience in and keeps them interested. In all three of her works *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*, Morrison makes biblical references, which gives her novels a spiritual side. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison refers to biblical ideas in the title of the novel and the characters' names. The title *Song of Solomon* comes from a book in the bible. Milkman overhears children singing a song about Solomon and after listening to the lyrics, he discovers the song was written about his grandfather.

The names in *Song of Solomon* are also bible-related. There is a tradition in the Dead family that they pick random names from the bible. Pilate's name was chosen because her father liked the way the letters looked, how some letters towered over others. Pilate's name literally means 'Christ-killer.' Milkman's sisters also have names from the Bible: 1st Corinthians and Magdalene. *The Bluest Eye* references the bible with the style in which Morrison writes; 'And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it' (109). This excerpt sounds like it would be something straight out of the Bible. *Beloved* also references the bible in many different ways. Firstly, Morrison references the Bible indirectly with the themes of sin, forgiving one another, and redemption found throughout the novel. Also, the story told where Denver and Beloved drink the milk and blood from Sethe's breast has strong biblical undertones to it. It can be looked at as Denver and Beloved receiving the body and blood of Christ, or communion, from Sethe. The use of biblical references in the novels gives a new perspective to the ethical issues that Morrison presents.

Toni Morrison has a distinct style with her use of characters in all three of the novels...In all of them Morrison is very good at letting her readers into the minds of her characters and telling them everything the character is feeling, seeing, or hearing. After only a few chapters into the book, the reader feels like a part of the story. In *The Bluest Eye*, although the main character is Pecola, most of the story is told through the main narrator, Claudia. Like *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye* also tells the point-of-view of the 'bad guy' in the novel. In *The Bluest Eye*, the 'bad guy' is Cholly, Pecola's father, who rapes her. Previous to reading about the rape from Cholly's point-of-view, Cholly's life story is told. Because of the hard life he has had, the readers are not surprised that Cholly uses sexual violence to release some of his pent up anger. Although Cholly's point-of-view does not erase the sins he has committed, it makes his actions a little more tolerable.

In *Beloved*, there are many changes between narrators. It changes narrators so often that there were times when I was not able to tell who was narrating: Beloved, Sethe, or Denver. This not only adds to the complexity of the novel, it keeps the readers engaged at all times. One of the minor narrators in the novel, Stamp Paid, is not a part of Sethe's family, but he is a white man from the town that observes the family at 124. This character shows what the outside view is of the family. The use of narrating characters, although confusing at times, adds to the complexity and depth of the novels by giving the readers perspectives on the situation.

Morrison uses very unique ways to divide up her novels. Although all three of the novels are split up differently, Morrison uses the same motive for splitting up the stories. *Song of Solomon* is split up into two sections. The first section ends with Lena telling Milkman he is no longer part of the family. In the second part Milkman embarks on a journey to find gold. He never finds the gold, but he learns a lot about himself and changes from a person full of hatred and greed to a person capable of love and kindness. *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four sections, based on the seasons over a one year period. The novel begins with autumn and ends with summer.

Beloved is divided into three sections. Each section begins with '124 was' and then an adjective. The first section begins '124 was spiteful,' the second section begins '124 was loud' and the third section starts with '124 was quiet.' Each simple statement about the place where the characters live says a lot in three words; it briefly summarizes the section that follows the sentence. In the beginning, the main character, Sethe, is still angry about her Sweet Home experience. The middle section is when the most action occurs, which would explain why 124 is described as loud. The last section is when the main issue of the novel has been resolved and things have calmed down, which is why 124 is described as quiet. Morrison divides her novels into sections to show the changes that are occurring in the novels. Her use of biblical references, characters, and how she sections off her novels add complexity to each story, which is more appealing to the readers."

Mary Cash
"Toni Morrison's Style"
marycash123wordpress.com

"Toni Morrison uses stream of consciousness in passages throughout *Beloved*. In this passage, readers hear the voice of a character named Beloved who seems to be the spirit of the murdered infant of another character named Sethe: 'I am alone I want to be the two of us I want the join I come out of blue water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I come up I need to find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am not there is a house there is what she whispered to me I am where she told me I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me'

Morrison doesn't use proper capitalization or grammar throughout the passage (e.g., 'join' is used as a noun). In the place of punctuation, Morrison simply inserts gaps in the text. She also makes use of repetition: when Beloved repeats the words, 'I am not dead,' she seems to be willing herself to live through a kind of mantra or incantation. Morrison uses run-on sentences and lack of punctuation to show the frantic urgency that Beloved feels when she finds herself alone in death, and to convey her deep desire to be reunited with Sethe—effectively letting readers 'listen in' on her thoughts."

"Stream-of-consciousness in *Beloved*"
litthearts.com

"An author's style is what defines his or her work. Toni Morrison's writing style is easily distinguishable due to her unique use of language. Her novels are easy to read, and she incorporates many different styles into her writing, such as switching the voice of narration throughout her stories for a change of perspective. Some of her most commonly used techniques are the use of descriptive analogies, important historical references, and varied sentence structure....

Morrison is generally known for her use of unusual—yet effective—comparisons that give further description to the details she presents. More specifically, she utilizes similes in her writing to help the reader connect the content with alternate images and experiences. This can be seen in *Song of Solomon* as Pilate whispers 'My baby girl' and Morrison describes the atmosphere of the church: 'Words tossed like stones into a silent canyon' (*Song of Solomon* 319). Another instance in which Morrison uses a unique comparison occurs in *The Bluest Eye* when Pecola Breedlove lies awake at night, listening to her mom and dad fight: 'the unquarreled evening hug like the first note of a dirge in sullenly expectant air' (*The Bluest Eye* 41). Yet another simile appears in *Jazz* when Violet describes her fascination with the city: 'Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half' (*Jazz* 7). Clearly, these analogies not only make the novels more interesting, but they also contribute to the overall style of Toni Morrison's writing.

One of the key 'trademarks' of Morrison's work is her frequent use of significant references to history. These not only provide background information about the time period in which the novels take place, but the historical roots also add more depth to the stories and make them seem more realistic.... For example *Song of Solomon* contains a lot of magical realism yet Morrison also grounds the plot with concrete examples of history, such as when Milkman questions Susan Byrd about his grandfather's past: 'Did Jake have to register at the Freedman's Bureau before he left the state?' 'Everybody did. Everybody who had

been slaves, that is' (*Song of Solomon* 324). This gives the readers specific information about the Macon Dead's (Jake's) past and also reminds them of the time period in which the story takes place including a reference to the Freedman's Bureau. Another indication of the historical implications of a time period surface in *The Bluest Eye* through what Pecola--a child--has learned from her parents about the outside world: 'Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days' (*The Bluest Eye* 17). This proves an innate fear, of being an outsider or rejected, that people of that time period would have experienced. Similarly, as *Jazz* is set in 1926, another historical perspective is represented through a reference to the fashion of the time: 'Violet would dress her hair for her the way the girls wore it now: short, bangs paper sharp above the eyebrows' (*Jazz* 108). Thus, historical citations are undoubtedly a major ingredient in Morrison's recipe for success....

She includes a wide variety of different types of sentences, which makes her writing that much more fluid. One type she often inserts into her writing is balanced sentences, exemplified in *Song of Solomon* when Milkman ponders the relationship between Corinthians and her mysterious lover: 'He thought it was funny, sweet, and a little sad' (*Song of Solomon* 211). Another way that Morrison takes advantage of her style is by also applying periodic and inverted sentences to her novels, such as in *The Bluest Eye* when Junior's mother comes home to discover her precious cat dead and spots Pecola: 'Up over the hump of the cat's back she looked' (*The Bluest Eye* 92). The author's reason for including these types of sentences is to break the stream of monotonous reading by creating dynamic sentences that are somewhat unexpected.

In addition, Morrison entices the reader by manipulating sentence length and wording to express the tone or emotion she is trying to convey. This is exemplified through the terse statements that appear in *Jazz* when Violet is violently reflecting on her husband's affair: 'One man. One defenseless girl. Death' (*Jazz* 73). And the same idea of using sentences with no verbs also appears in *The Bluest Eye* when Cholly is relieved that the banquet after his Aunt Jimmy's funeral has finally come: 'Laughter, relief, a steep hunger for food' (*The Bluest Eye* 143). Here the reader can easily follow what is going on without the aid of complete sentences. Morrison demonstrates her skill in sentence usage very often throughout her works, and the quality of these sentences reflects her overall skill as an author.

There are numerous components that compile to form an author's style. A few recognizable traits of Morrison's work include the use of similes and creative analogies, excerpts from history to make the stories legitimate, and diverse sentence structure. All of these aspects (and more) combine to make Toni Morrison's complex and intricate novels what they are today. This author's distinctive style is what has made her so renowned and prominent in the literary world."

"Style / Toni Morrison"
ahittler.wordpress.com

Toni Morrison emerged in the 1970s as the major black American novelist. At her best, as in *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison is by aesthetic standards among the major novelists of the 20th century: mythic, lyrical, sensuous, eloquent, richly symbolic and allegorical. Although deeply influenced by the Modernism of white novelists such as Faulkner, she is Postmodernist in rejecting the concept of common humanity and the traditional unifying American metaphor of the melting pot, because she believes the dominant culture is white, racist, and corrupt. She rejects the teaching of Martin Luther King, Jr. that a person should be judged not by race but by the content of his or her character and is clearly--as in *Tar Baby* (1981)--calling for a return to racial segregation. She was a leader in the black separatist movement calling for Afro-centrism. There are few--if any--good white people in her fiction. Morrison is the most anti-American writer in the canon of American literature.

Michael Hollister (2020)