

# Toni morrison: first african american female author

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



Toni Morrison is not only a devoted humanitarian and one of the most respected contemporary black American female novelists, she is also known for her political activism. In her works, Morrison often emphasizes cultural awareness and an appreciation for ethnic diversity. She tackles hard subjects that explore identity and painful life experiences that can be uncomfortable for the reader, but they reflect historical events that are often ignored.

Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, portrays the dehumanizing effects of slavery and sexual assault that many women silently endured. Morrison dedicated her literary career to ensure that the black experience of slavery would not be told only in history books written by white people. Her characters demonstrate the physical and psychological damage inflicted on African Americans during and after the Civil War and even through the Civil Rights Movement.

Morrison once said in an interview, " I am writing for black people . . . . I don't have to apologize" (Hoby 1). The edgy style and controversial subject matter that Morrison used opened the doors for future black authors to boldly discuss the pain and prejudice that most Americans would like to forget; however, if we don't acknowledge the past, we are bound to repeat it. Her novel *Beloved* is an excellent example of this.

The 1950s and '60s were climactic decades for black Americans in general, socially and politically. As underrepresented groups began to get exposure, the black women's movement gained visibility, leading up to " the black women's literary renaissance" of the 1970s (Donaghy 1). Morrison was probably the leading black female writer of this time and was an inspiration

to countless others to follow, including Toni Cade Bambara, Gloria Naylor, Roxane Gay, Jesmyn Ward, bell hooks, and Nikki Giovanni (" Renaissance" 1).

Some of these authors followed Morrison's style of blending her characters' physical and spiritual realities, making characters multidimensional and relatable to the reader, even if they suffer from mental illness. The main character and narrator of *Beloved*, Sethe, is a terrorized Kentucky slave at the beginning of the novel, and even after she gains her freedom, she is still mentally enslaved by what happened in her past.

Her character is based on a real runaway slave woman named Margaret Garner who escaped from a plantation in 1856 and murdered her child when she was caught by the owner (Zhigang 54). Morrison took Garner's real story and added the description of the psychological effects of abuse.

One of the most traumatic scenes of the novel, *Beloved*, is when Sethe and her daughters have run away from the plantation and been caught and told they will have to return. Out of sacrificial love, Sethe decides to kill her daughters rather than allow them to endure the brutality she experienced.

She actually only kills the two-year-old, and she has " Beloved" inscribed on the child's tombstone. Later, after Sethe gains freedom and is living in Ohio, she meets a young woman who introduces herself as *Beloved*, and Sethe believes this is her daughter reincarnated. Sethe is unable to rationalize or explain anything that happens at this point.

Morrison beautifully and painfully describes Sethe's confusion and mental anguish, as she tries to find peace and forgiveness. Paul D, another main

character, is also haunted by his past experiences on the same plantation, and these memories create tension and anxiety in most of their interactions. Rather than bringing them together, these shared experiences keep Sethe and Paul D silent and separated.

Morrison's shocking descriptions in *Beloved* (as well as some of her other books, particularly *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*) introduced readers of mainstream fiction to horrors that they had probably never heard about. Some people have said these conversations were also part of the Black Power Movement that led to the development of Black Studies programs in universities across the United States (Als 1). From them came the development of additional programs like Gender Studies, Women's Studies, Asian Studies, Chicano Studies, and other studies of underrepresented minority groups.

Morrison is also known for using biblical allusions throughout her novels. In *Beloved*, Paul D has been compared to the story of Noah, as there are scenes with heavy rain when Paul D escapes, and he ultimately was the only male who survived to obtain freedom from the plantation (Zhang 54). Another important character is Baby Suggs, who is Sethe's mother-in-law. She is described as "an unchurched preacher" (Morrison 87) who gives sermons in the Clearing and is described to be like Jesus during his ministry. These references to the Bible bring in a religious and spiritual element that is also something many American readers can relate to.

## Works Cited

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