

Toni Morrison Presentation

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NATIONAL BESTSELLER

PLAYING IN THE DARK

*Whiteness and the
Literary Imagination*

TONI MORRISON

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

Toni Morrison

- Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (known as Toni Morrison) was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio and died August 5, 2019, Bronx, New York.
- Was an American novelist, essayist, book editor, and college professor.
- Her works influenced identity, racial tension, and good versus evil.
- Her notable awards include: Presidential Medal of Freedom, National Humanities Medal, Nobel Prize in Literature, Pulitzer Prize for Fiction
- Studied English at Howard University where she received her B.A. in 1953. In 1955, she earned a master's in American Literature from Cornell University.
- She then taught at Texas Southern University for two years, afterwards she taught at Howard from 1957 to 1964. In 1965 Morrison became a fiction editor at Random House. In 1984 she began teaching writing at the State University of New York in Albany. In 1989 she joined the faculty of Princeton University; she retired in 2006.
- Her major works include: "The Bluest Eye", "Beloved", "Sula", "God Help the Child", "A Mercy", "Home", "Song of Solomon", "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination", "Paradise", "Love."
- Coined the term, "Africanism"
- Fun fact: Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison became a Catholic at the age of 12 and took the baptismal name: Anthony (after Anthony of Padua), which led to her nickname, Toni.



Playing in the Dark

- In 1990, Morrison delivered a series of three lectures at the William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies at Harvard University. She then adapted the texts to her 91-page book, *Playing in the Dark*. The book's three chapters are "Black Matters", "Romancing the Shadow", and "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks".
- The book highlighted how Blacks are usually represented through the lens of white perception rather than the other way around.
- American writers sought to define their works in contrast to European writers. American writers highlighted their freedom by contrasting it with the enslavement of slaves. Regularly, black presence is used to define whites in literature such as in the stories of Edgar Allan Poe.
- It is important to note that though she is an African American that examined white literature, she remains neutral throughout her book.
- In *Playing in the Dark* the first chapter Morrison asserts her aim is to broaden the study of American literature. She maintains that in her examination, she will not function as a literary critic but instead as a writer. She is interested in examining the parts of a writer's consciousness that remain inaccessible to the writer.



Playing in the Dark (continued)

- In *Playing in the Dark*, the second chapter Morrison examines Edgar Allan Poe's novella *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. In which a native named Nu-Nu dies and Peter and Pym, who are on the same boat as Nu-Nu, pass through the white curtain of a waterfall. In the conclusion of the book it states that it's the whiteness that kills the black man.
- In *Playing in the Dark*, the third chapter Morrison wrote that the metaphorical uses of racism are essential parts of both national literature and character, even today. This racism also is used as part of an ideology that rationalizes white power through black inadequacy. She highlights that even though the United States has often been acclaimed for making many good moral decisions among its people it has also made decisions about morality without referring to its black population. When, the black population has been on the frontlines for many debates, from constitutional rights to matters of justice.



Playing in the Dark Quotes

- Morrison stated, “I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World—without the mandate for conquest”(3). Morrison opens her book stating that she is going to draw a new kind of map. This is a metaphor for the type of examination she is undertaking. She wants to examine the way in which the African-American existence has affected white American writers.
- Morrison stated, "The Africanist character “as surrogate and enabler. In what ways does the imaginative encounter with Africanism enable white writers to think about themselves?”(52). She ties this topic to relational identity formation between white writers and black presence.



Playing in the Dark Quotes (Continued)

- Morrison stated, "We “need to analyze the manipulation of the Africanist narrative (that is, the story of a black person, the experience of being bound and/or rejected) as a means of meditation—both safe and risky, on one’s own humanity. Such analyses will reveal how the representation and appropriation of that narrative provides opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, rebellion, and to speculate on fate and destiny” (53). This quote is important in the sense that instead of using the black narrative to highlight the freedom and power of white writers, it should be used to help readers learn about the human condition and history.





Questions

- Why do you think it was important for Toni Morrison to remain neutral in her examination of white literature?
- What issues can arise when authors use race to juxtapose themselves or characters in the book?
- What does the term "Africanism" mean?