

Toni Morrison and William Faulkner: The Necessity of a Great American Novelist

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Over the years, as Toni Morrison's literary reputation has flourished, the comparisons with William Faulkner have intensified as well. Faulkner is the leading benchmark against which modern American literary greatness is measured, and it seems Morrison has been declared his successor. Since her Nobel Prize in 1993, there has been a steady stream of such declarations both in the popular media from *Time* to *Oprah* and throughout the scholarly press from special issues of journals to monographs to celebratory anthologies. This is no where more apparent than her appearance on two *Time* covers in one year. First in January 1998 in a cover story entitled "The Sound And the Fury of Toni Morrison," and subtitled "With her new novel *Paradise*, the Nobel laureate shows that she's the Great American Storyteller." The article compared Morrison favorably to Faulkner as it publicized the release of her new novel, *Paradise*, the first since the award. Second, and perhaps more telling for all of its cultural implications, was the cover, in October 1998, devoted to the forthcoming film release of *Beloved*, an Oprah Winfrey project which she labeled "a central fable of her race and sex," and to the power of Winfrey to shape and elevate literary careers since the launching of her "book club" in 1996 -- including Morrison's, whose *Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* became Oprah selections, and best sellers decades after their initial publication.[1](#)

Has Morrison replaced Faulkner? What does this question say about the notions of "literary greatness" or "literary classic"? Morrison, as myth-maker/griot/folklorist, is the perfect novelist for our era -- polished in her technique, and poetic in her language. She considers herself first and foremost a story teller whose poetic sensibility helps readers experience the world in new ways. Like Faulkner, Morrison is in love with lyrical and mesmerizing language that conveys love of a community and offers hope in a chaotic world, a world drenched not only with the evil of race thinking, but also the evil of sexism. Morrison's fictive world is mythic, legendary -- full of complicated stories about ordinary people who have survived and prospered in an extraordinary and almost miraculous way inside the maelstrom of American racism and sexism.

In addition, Morrison's work is poetic, deep, and difficult, and evokes a past suffused in the subjectivity of memory. Also like Faulkner, she breathes artistic life into the past to make a world coherent, an infinite canvas for storytelling in which history has meaning and purpose as assimilated myth, not so much used to understand the past but to convey Black culture into the present. In short, her work has a connection to the real world while still rising above it -- mythic, the way honorific literature supposedly should be.

For literary and cultural critics like Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, and Morrison, herself, her work represents the cultural revolution associated with the flowering of Black literature in the last 20 years in which especially the feminine voice was cultivated and elevated to explore a world with the grandeur of a unique language. Morrison, as both editor and novelist, created space for Black women writers who, in Gates' terms, had been far too long "the subjugated, the voiceless, the invisible, the unrepresented and the unrepresentable." He suggests her role was similar to Alain Locke's in the Harlem Renaissance. And, indeed, Morrison has moved Black American women's writing not only to the very "forefront" of a cultural revolution in which women are reading women as never before, but to forging a "tradition within a tradition."[2](#)

At the beginning of the Cold War, Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize and declared a literary genius to redeem literature as a more purely aesthetic endeavor. His mythic, poetic and apolitical vision of his beloved South was an anodyne to the politicized fiction of the 1930's and a counter to Soviet Socialist Realism. Elevated and re-considered, in part, because he had not allowed the polemical to intrude into his novels, Faulkner carried the banner of American individualism into the Cold War. My research about the creation of Faulkner's reputation showed how and why he became universalized as an "emblem of the freedom of the individual under capitalism." As I noted, he was "seen to exemplify the same values that Western intellectuals saw in capitalism which made it morally superior to communism. He came to represent American literary modernism and Western humanist values." Faulkner's work was "championed and canonized because his often supremely individualistic themes and technically difficult prose served an ideological cause. Unintentionally, he produced a commodity of enormous value as a cultural weapon in the early years of the Cold War." There is a rather similar basis for Morrison's elevation, as Nancy Peterson reported in her introduction to the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*, "Canonizing Toni Morrison":

Toni Morrison has become the name around which the debates of considerable significance to American literature, culture and ideology have amassed -- these include debates about multicultural curricula; about the relation of slavery to freedom; about the possibility of creating literature that is both aesthetically beautiful and politically engaged.³

Morrison's work represents a heightened sense of Faulkner's individualism, and the continued primacy of elitist aesthetic formalism. According to Morrison, Black people in America have created a fabulous world in the face of chaos, disorder, and abuse, and she has relied on a classic form of storytelling in which meaning, order and "hope" are derived from that experience. At the center of her poetic, race and gender conscious prose is her belief in individual salvation and epiphany. Her novels fuse contemporary literary technique with the Romantic poet's struggle for personal transcendence, a search for self and self-discovery too. Her work combines a communal center with a focus on individual consciousness and awareness. In the 1993 spotlight of the Nobel award, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) was reissued with an afterword in which Morrison celebrated the success, not just of her own work, but of an era of black women's writing, and is worth quoting at length:

My choice of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial) my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate co-conspiracy and intimacy (without any distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black-American culture into a language worthy of the culture.

. . . Hearing 'civilized' languages debase humans, watching cultural exorcisms debase literature, seeing oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors -- I can say that my narrative project is as difficult today as it was thirty years ago.

With very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread. And it has taken twenty-five years to gain for her the respectful publication this edition is.⁴

She invites readers to participate in a soaring affirmation: Life can be understood, she says, and it is beautiful, even glorious. In each of her novels, the individual finds knowledge, meaning, and faith in a clearly duplicitous world. Such affirmation rests on Morrison's racialized and feminist self. She wants to strip away all the racist assumptions, not in order to study race but to look deeply at what remains, to see it in a new way that is fresh and clear. "In writing novels," Morrison noted, "the adventure for me has been exploration of seemingly impenetrable, race-inflected, race-clotted topics":

What I am determined to do is to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it. I am determined to concretize a literary discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of permanently unrealizable dream. It is a discourse that

(unwittingly) allows racism an intellectual weight to which it has absolutely no claim. Unlike the successful advancement of argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary. And, unlike visual media, narrative has not pictures to ease the difficulty of that step.⁵

For example, the convent women in her most recent novel, *Paradise*, are presented without racial markers. The threat they pose to the men of Ruby is an "unraced" danger, a threat because they are women. Morrison, like Faulkner, seeks to tell these stories from the inside, without apology or explanation. She explores the Black community alone as if it were isolated from the white world. In her terms, consciousness means personal understanding first, and survival of the clan/tribe/community second. This form of consciousness is a way to attack the invisibility that whites prefer for Blacks and the voicelessness men have forced upon women.

Because Morrison, more than any living novelist, has participated in both the critical commentary on her own work and on the establishing of aesthetic sensibilities (as essayist and book editor), it seems as if her work is saturated in the political. We have been fully conditioned to believe that race and gender consciousness is really identity politics and by definition oppositional, simply declared as given, and to accept as axiomatic the feminist belief that the personal is political. Morrison, Gates and other post-structuralist literary critics can simply affirm that all art is political, and then move on to what is really important for them, namely aesthetics. In Gates' terms black women's writing is political because it repudiates the Black nationalist and racist stereotypes. Thus, the critical commentary focuses almost exclusively on Morrison's aesthetic concerns: beautiful language and a new definition for Black writing.

Many years ago when uncertainty had not yet made its way into literature, Malcolm Cowley (who, it is safe to say, almost single-handedly resurrected Faulkner's literary reputation) could declare unselfconsciously that Faulkner was great because he was great. There is much of the same veneration associated with Morrison even in today's more sophisticated critical era. Perhaps the most comprehensive post-structuralist reading of Morrison and Faulkner is Philip Weinstein's *What Else But Love? The Ordeal of Race in Faulkner and Morrison* (1996). Weinstein attempts an argument rooted in the belief that "both are major novelists of racial turmoil." However, the terms of the analysis are still grounded in the "supremacy" of their style, the greatness of their literary voice: "Their texts sing, refusing conventional novelists paths and instead overwhelming the reader with formal experiment, with sequences that range from the light of lyricism to the gravity of tragic insight -- in a word with writerly authority."⁶

In the present era, Morrison simply takes for granted the evil of white racism, and tries to provide access to Black life without feeling compelled to explain it, without sparing feelings, and certainly without concern about white permission. Morrison is imaginative enough, and the community is tough and sophisticated enough, to withstand and absorb all of the stories. Morrison's language tries to capture the essence of the Black world in all its guises, and a readership, both black and white, follows her, in part, because there is

the lifting of the "veil." She taps into the power of narrative to show the complexity inherent in the lives of ordinary Black people. Like jazz music, Morrison wants her novels to be complex, beautiful and challenging, but wildly popular too. Her aim is to explore complicated ideas but only in a literary way with no intrusions from the polemical. In a lengthy *Paris Review* interview, which in itself is a tribute to Morrison's stature (given the journal's long history of discussions with the most influential novelists of the 20th century), Morrison makes this comparison:

I thought of myself as like the jazz musician: someone who practices and practices and practices in order to be able to invent and to make his art look effortless and graceful. I was always conscious of the constructed aspect of the writing process, and that art appears natural and elegant only as a result of constant practice and awareness of its formal structures.⁷

It is very clear that the exclusion of polemics is deliberate. Morrison thinks deeply about the "big" questions and wants her fiction to explore complicated matters. However, in her novels, Morrison is only interested in the literary imagination, not the thrusting of politics into literature. The interpenetration of Morrison's extra-literary commentary and the literary criticism she offers of her own work (which does often dwell on social and political matters) create the appearance that the novels have some political base, but it is precisely the separation from the polemical that is so attractive to literary critics and reviewers, and middle class readers -- thus her ascendancy in contrast to Alice Walker's decline in recent years, for example.

As a vocal public intellectual, Morrison certainly does explore, and sharply so, the pervasiveness of racism and sexism. In her essays and interviews, there is a conception of racism as white psychosis (and by extension sexism and religious fundamentalism too). She argues that racialized language and race mythology both shape and distort American reality. American culture, she suggests, is awash in race and racist thinking. Such analytic thinking may hover over and around her work, but not within. Inside of Morrison's fiction she explores "how" not "why." Her stories are of Black survival, redemption, and grace -- in which poetry and language are the antidotes to the racist poison of a duplicitous and damaging culture. Morrison removes whites very consciously from the middle of her fiction as a way to highlight how well Blacks understand such poison. Morrison suggests that her stories work just fine without white folks, and that whites and white gaze are not necessary in order to see Blacks clearly or to offer up meaning for Black life.

Building on the work of Weinstein, a recent collection of 15 scholarly essays have been collected in a celebratory volume entitled, *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-Envisioned* (1997) that pairs the two pre-eminent novelists of modern American fiction. The shared assumptions for this collection, and the basic stance of many of the contributors, are the epic nature of these authors' work and the artistic "genius" at the core of their creations. The formalist issues of complexity, nuanced expression, poetic language, and visionary insight form the bond of co-equals. In fact, when the editors suggest that "no reader of Faulkner will ever read him in the same way

after encountering the works of Morrison" -- then perhaps Morrison has already displaced Faulkner.[8](#)

If, for many critics, Morrison has already surpassed Faulkner perhaps it is because his turn-of-the-century "modernist" core is full of a mocking irony (not to mention his own racist beliefs and misogynistic bent) that holds tight to his mythic vision of the "doom" inherent in slavery and slavery's racist center. In *Paradise*, Morrison, more than most reviewers understood, tries to absorb the counterpoint of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* -- the pathos of Quentin Compson's ghostly nightmares crashing against Thomas Sutpen's omnipotent rage about "one drop of blood," and of Miss Rosa (in town) and Clytie (out at the decaying mansion) standing as both chorus and conscience. Rather directly Morrison takes on Faulkner's most important racialized novel, where his emphasis is to understand both race obsession and the inevitable doom of those race-obsessed. For decades Faulkner's misogyny was excused and his racism accepted as quaint Southern nationalism, because his stories of human frailty and passion were told from the heart, with deep-felt compassion. His style of fusing past and present was so daring as he worked to capture it all in one breath, in one sentence that he came define modernist technique. Her long-time fascination with Faulkner is well known; however, in *The Paris Review* interview, she notes how she had gone through his novel to trace and chart racial clues -- every "appearance, disguise, and disappearance on every page:"

. . . But I was so fascinated, technically. It is technically just astonishing. As a reader you have been forced to hunt for a drop of blood that means everything and nothing. The insanity of racism. So the structure is the argument. Not what this one says, or that one says. It is the *structure* of the book, and you are hunting this black thing that is nowhere to be found, and yet makes all the difference. No one has done anything quite like that ever. So, when I critique, what I am saying is, I don't care if Faulkner is a racist or not; I don't personally care, but I am fascinated by what it means to write like this.[9](#)

In *Paradise*, Morrison extends Faulkner's racist obsessions to include sexism and to judge it just as damaging: The founding families, blue black "eight rocks," have been shut out, disallowed, and are forced to wander in the wilderness searching for a place in which to establish a world and avenge an insult. They create a utopia, but one that has ossified, doomed in its patriarchal religious fundamentalism, racism, and need for control. There is pride of self, a Black solipsism, without reservation or obeisance, but there is no inter-racial unity in resistance to oppression and no organizing of group resistance in the name of anti-racism or anti-sexism. Her central characters become self-aware -- cognizant of ancestry and mythology -- and somewhat more in control over their world, but the sensibility is not an historical or social understanding that leads to a changing of their world, but rather a violent outrage against women.

In sum, Morrison knows that racism and sexism seep in everywhere, and are deeply embedded. However, she does not loop back to the crossroad where social protest literature parted company with modern art. She would never agree with the 1930's radical

artists who asserted that all art is not just political but propaganda for an evil and corrupt capitalism. Instead, Morrison believes that the psyches of racists are a reflection of that corruption not its roots. Morrison has been elevated and canonized in terms very similar to Faulkner's. Both are praised for their aesthetic innovations while valorized for creating their own domains. Her goal is to create a Black novel that moves from racist language to race-specific language to non-racist art as demonstration of the incomparable eloquence of a Black literature, which must be judged on its own terms. In Morrison, oppression will be vilified, but it seems that capitalism and its elitist values are safe, just as they were with Faulkner. It is comforting to have a literary "genius" in the romantic tradition who gives voice to individual salvation in a racist, sexist, and duplicitous world -- an epic storyteller, a mythmaker, a seer.

In short, Faulkner was anointed in 1950 to reconstitute literature as an aesthetic endeavor. Fifty years later, Morrison is elevated for fiction that does similar work. As Faulkner helped to carry the banner of individualism into the literary nationalism of the Cold War, Morrison represents the voices of Blacks and women in the cultural upheavals of the last quarter-century. For Morrison, racism and sexism are psychological disorders. And in each of her novels the central characters who do survive, find redemption, liberation, and justice in individual resistance, not as group or community even.

Notes

[1](#) Notwithstanding Jonathan Franzen's recent rejection of an Oprah appearance, the "Oprah Effect" is real, profitable, and far-reaching. See John Young, "Toni Morrison, Oprah Winfrey, and Postmodern Popular Audiences," *African American Review* 35.2 (2001): 181-204. For a recent re-stating of Faulkner's mythic rise to prominence, see Paul Gray, "Mr. Faulkner Goes to Stockholm," *Smithsonian* October 2001: 57-60. *Time* cover stories appear in 19 January 1998 and 5 October 1998 issues.

[2](#) Gates, Henry Louis and Nellie Y. McKay, Gen eds. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1997: "Preface" xxxvii-xli; "Literature since 1970," 2011-2020; and "Toni Morrison," 2094-2098.

[3](#) See Lawrence Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 1988: Introduction, 1-7 and Conclusion, 200-210, and *Modern Fiction Studies* 4. 39 (1993): 465.

[4](#) "Afterword," *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume, 1994: 215-16.

[5](#) Toni Morrison, "Home." In Wahneema H. Lubiano, ed. *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, US terrain*. New York: Pantheon, 1997, pp. 8-9. See also Morrison's

widely cited *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Random House, 1993.

[6](#) New York: Columbia UP, 1996: xix-xx and 195-96. For Black writers and several important book reviewers, such as John Leonard, book reviewer for *The New York Times* and *The Nation*, and long-time Morrison admirer, the enshrinement started five years before the Nobel Prize. In 1988, when *Beloved* failed to win the National Book Award and before Morrison had received the Pulitzer Prize, a group of 48 prominent Black writers and literary critics addressed her in a letter of protest in *The New York Times* stating: "For all of America, for all of American letters, you have advanced the moral and artistic standards by which we must measure the daring and the love of our national imagination and our collective intelligence as a people. And so we write, here, hoping not to delay, not to arrive, in any way, late with this, our simple tribute to the seismic character and beauty of your writing." *The New York Times Book Review*, 24 January 1988: 2. This was followed in 1992, when John Leonard, baldly declared that she created literature of the highest order with writing that has the grand mythic sweep of both the Bible and Shakespeare. Leonard noted that in brilliant prose and with warm embrace of both her characters and her readers, Morrison "reimagines the lost history of her people, their love and work and nightmare passage and redemptive music." With respect to literary antecedents and hierarchy, he brazenly suggested that "She ate Faulkner for a snack."

[7](#) "Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction CXXXIV." *The Paris Review*. 128 (Fall 1993): 111. This is a rather Hemingwayesque judgment and Zen-like stance on the artlessness of art.

[8](#) Carol Kolmarten, et. al. eds. *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-envisioned*, Jackson: UP of Mississippi: xi.

[9](#) "Toni Morrison," *The Paris Review*, 101.