

A Context for Understanding Morrison's Work _____

Susan R. Bowers

The impact of Toni Morrison on contemporary culture has been revolutionary and profound. In assessing that impact, Susan R. Bowers begins with “Morrison’s most revolutionary—and most defining—act” of writing “for black readers about black people.” This singular and courageous act “challenged white hegemony” and simultaneously “credited the complexity and originality of African American life by working within its intricate and real system of meaning, language, and art.” Why and how Morrison dared to do so lies “in her historical and cultural contexts, since so much of her oeuvre has been dedicated to rehistoricizing black history.” Bowers traces Morrison’s development within the African American communities that, like Morrison’s grandparents, migrated from the black South to the black North, bringing with them the black vernacular tradition. That tradition and “its embodiment of transformative and creative elements” empowered “Morrison’s project of writing outside the white gaze.” The strength and richness of Morrison’s childhood “is responsible for her adult love and admiration for black people and her dedication to portraying them more multidimensionally than as victims.” Almost or perhaps equally as powerful was “the emphasis her family placed on reading.” Morrison could read before she entered first grade; throughout high school she relished the novels of Flaubert, Austen, and Dostoevsky, giving her “a deep connection to the Western literary tradition even while she maintained her grounding in the black vernacular tradition.” Morrison also grew up “immersed in the rich panoply of African American music, from spirituals and work songs to blues and jazz.” Similarly indelible influences shaped Morrison’s young adulthood, notably *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act. Building on the broad and deep embrace of her cultural legacy, Morrison emerged as a political and cultural leader, a writer who has captured “strategic moments in black American history’

when disruption and change were taking place.” The strength of her heritage undergirds Morrison’s works, each of which is “a site of improvisation and of interrogation of the changing realities of African American experience in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.” — S.O.I. and M.W.I.

In 1985 African American scholar Cornel West decried the absence of black public intellectuals, and two years later, Russell Jacoby lamented the dearth of any public thinkers attempting to influence social and political events. However, the same year that Jacoby’s book *The Last Intellectuals* appeared, Toni Morrison’s fifth novel, *Beloved*, was published. By 1988, Morrison had won the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* and was soon to become the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993). Morrison’s ability to write eloquently about an escaped slave’s attempt to murder all of her children to save them from a life of enslavement had punctured the silence in American society about slavery. *Beloved* was being read not only in high school and college classrooms throughout the nation but also by the general public. Moreover, Morrison was weighing in on major public concerns both in essays and speeches and on such television shows as *Today* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Along with West, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and others, Morrison would be one of the “new intellectuals” featured in an *Atlantic Monthly* article in 1995. She has been called “the most prominent artist-critic in contemporary American and African American letters” (McBride 164) and “something of a sacred text herself” (Bouson 1).

The story of Morrison’s rise to prizewinning author and public intellectual speaks to her talent, fundamental changes in American society, and her own understanding of what it has meant to be African American in twentieth- and twenty-first-century America. Morrison was born into the cauldron of race in America only sixty years after Emancipation, and her identity has been shaped by the history, life experiences, and culture that she has in common with other African Americans.