Toni Morrison

A Literary Life

Linda Wagner-Martin

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For William and Evan Duff and
Jessica Kate Wagner

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Preface

More than 20 years ago, when Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, the world of literary devotees turned to a new page in accolades presented to American (and African American) writers. It was not exactly the start of this wise woman's successful career, because that had officially occurred in 1977 with the publication of her third novel, *Song of Solomon*. This startling presentation came after decades of the Swedish Academy's slighting the most prolific achievements of United States writers: rather, the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison marked the merging of African American literary achievement with the more conventional, and perhaps more anticipated, attention to mainstream American fiction.

During the twentieth century, no other country had produced such aesthetic bounty. Within the United States, aesthetic accomplishment outdid itself year after year – nurtured particularly by the democratic freedoms to write whatever an artist chose. In America, the freedom to create paralleled the freedom to say. Toni Morrison, having been a senior editor for more than 20 years at Random House, understood how much freedom she had been given: she poured her considerable ability into her novels, aiming high and individually with each book. From *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 through *Sula* in 1973, *Song of Solomon* in 1977, *Tar Baby* in 1981, *Beloved* in 1987, and *Jazz* in 1992 – the latter coupled with her blockbuster book of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*: *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* – whatever Morrison published was truly unanticipated. It was deserving of not only attention but praise. It was a statement of such significance that newspapers and magazines (and all kinds of Internet sources) carried multiple reviews. Morrison's work prompted waves of commentary, both print and electronic, despite the supposedly "dying" market for fiction and literary critique. When Toni Morrison chose to pick up her pencil, even before the Nobel Prize was given to her, the readers of the world paid attention.

One reason Morrison was so important to the world of writing was that she spoke for a populace that had had only sporadic representation: African American culture, like its typically African American

life, could count on one hand the writers who spoke truly for this body of richly expressed narrative. As Morrison envisioned African American culture, she harvested as well much about the African culture that underlaid it. And Morrison claimed not only the African American palm; she claimed the African American *woman* writer's palm. She did not flinch at what she saw as her significant task: she approached telling the stories of black women's lives, no matter when in history those lives occurred, with indefatigable energy, accuracy, and passion. She also understood from the start that no woman's life existed in a vacuum, so she became adept at creating the lives of African American *men* (and it is for that reason that this study begins with her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, 1977, rather than her first, *The Bluest Eye*, 1970).

In a literary world where publishers demanded uplifting writing, where best-seller lists judged literary excellence by sales of books in the millions, Toni Morrison seldom reached records at all close to those commercial markers. Rather, she wrote what she saw as truth. She expressed the lives of African American characters with a deft grace that guided the reader's imagination to truths that might never previously have been acknowledged: she created and recreated all parts of inextinguishable lives so that readers understood the joys, and the pains, of those figures. She did not write autobiographically, except with the human impulse that took her into the souls and the experiences of her characters: *humanity expressed as seldom before* was her chosen topic.

After the admitted disruption of her winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, Morrison continued her steady path of accomplishment. In 1998 she published *Paradise*, the third of the books she considered her trilogy – *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise* – working for the first time on issues more spiritual than historical. In 2003 her treatise on men's lives as sources of community power appeared in a novel titled *Love*. In 2008 she continued her testament about forgiveness and love in *A Mercy*, and in 2012 she brought a number of aesthetic and philosophical issues together into one of the shortest – but perhaps, most powerful – of her novels, *Home*. Within this latter book, many of the tormented historical prisms of what was cast in *Beloved* as issues of slavery reappeared as issues of different kinds of trauma, some associated with warfare – again proving Morrison's skill with the creation of male characters as well as female.

Wherever and whenever Morrison turns to fiction, readers wait with intense suspense. Can she maintain her admittedly difficult route into the minds and souls of her readership? Can she continue to work the magic that arises with such calm from each of her printed pages? This book itself is one small testimony to her ability to evoke such magic, and such truth, as she writes and polishes – over and over – her unique, and much loved, novels.

Acknowledgments and Conventions

It has been a pleasure once more to work with the editors and staff of Palgrave Macmillan, a partnership which began in the late 1990s with my book on Sylvia Plath (and a second, revised edition of that study in 2002). In 2007 came *Ernest Hemingway, A Literary Life*; and in 2013, *Emily Dickinson, A Literary Life*. I have long appreciated the support and attention of Benjamin Doyle, Sophie Ainscough, and Tomas Rene (as well as the editors who came before them). Thanks also to Caroline Richards for her copyediting and Linda Auld for her managing of the production process.

For this book, I have assumed that three in-print collections of Toni Morrison's interviews and nonfiction will be available to readers: (1) Danille Taylor-Guthrie's collection of interviews with Morrison, published in 1994 as *Conversations with Toni Morrison* by the University Press of Mississippi; (2) Carolyn C. Denard's collection of Morrison's interviews, published by the same press in 2008 as *Toni Morrison: Conversations*; and (3) Professor Denard's collection of Morrison's essays, titled *Toni Morrison: What Moves at the Margin, Selected Nonfiction*, also published by the University Press of Mississippi in 2008. I have used the abbreviations *Con I* to cite the Taylor-Guthrie collection, and *Con II* to refer to the Denard collection of interviews. I refer to Denard's collection of Morrison's essays as *Nonfiction*. The essay by Toni Morrison in Brian Lanker's edited collection, *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America*, is referred to as *Lanker.*

Although I have included many of the excellent essays and books on Morrison's oeuvre in the Secondary Bibliography, there are still other works that – space permitting – might well have appeared. For their omission, my apologies. I also thank the many students at both Michigan State University and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill who brought energy and insight into the reading of Morrison's fiction.

Introduction: Morrison's Early Years

She was born Chloe Wofford in February 1931, to the wintry Lorain, Ohio, weather – and to her family, which included the Willises, her maternal grandparents and great-grandmother, as well as her parents and older sister Lois. In the steelworkers' neighborhood of mixed-race, lower-class people hard work was valued. Few people understood that lives elsewhere could be marked by a family's accumulation of wealth, not by their day-to-day earnings. But for these Lorain residents (some from Poland and central Europe; others from Mexico, Italy, and Greece; others – like the Woffords – from the American South), work or the promise of work comprised a primary element of the American dream. What such an ethic and such a household meant to the bright Chloe Ardelia Wofford was an atmosphere of reading and learning, of being useful. Morrison remembers that when she began school at five, she was one of the few children who could already read. In sixth grade, she was chosen to read to "the partially sighted" (Con II, 132). One of her middle-school teachers sent home a note to her mother which said, "You and your husband would be remiss in your duties if you do not see to it that this child goes to college" (Als 68).

In high school, Chloe was selected to work in the school library, and some accounts say she did secretarial work for the head librarian. She studied hard and was a non-stop reader, but she was also active in debate, the drama club, and on the yearbook staff (Li 11). Her tendency to be modest about her successes shows in an essay decades later, when she recalled, "I remember myself as surrounded by extraordinary adults who were smarter than me. I was better

educated, but I always thought that they had true wisdom and I had merely book learning. It was only when I began to write that I was able to marry those two things: wisdom and education" (Lanker 36).

She was already a writer: many of her essays were read aloud to her classes. Chloe Wofford was not only one of the few African American children in the Lorain, Ohio, public schools – she was also one of the smartest within the school population.

In retrospect, Morrison called Ohio "neither plantation nor ghetto" (Con I, 158). She insisted, as had Eudora Welty, that knowing *place* was crucial for a writer. "It is a feeling, it is a perception about the past, a matrix out of which one either does come or perceives one's beginnings. … It has very little to do with geography. … [In fact] you get closer to the truth when you sometimes ignore the facts of the 'place'" (in Cooper-Clark 192). About growing up in Lorain, Morrison was matter-of-fact: "We all shared the small space, one high school, three junior high schools, these totally dedicated teachers, poverty, and that kind of life" (Con II, 132). During the decades that followed, her descriptions of being poor are never self-pitying. Later in the interview, Morrison noted: "Being one of 'them' [the poor, the disadvantaged] for the first twenty years of my life, I'm very, very conscious of all – not upward mobility, but gestures of separation in terms of class" (Con II, 133). Years later, speaking at an international library congress in New York, Morrison admitted to then facing the life that was starting to unroll before her if she had not gone to college: "Had I lived the life that the state planned for me from the beginning, I would have lived and died in somebody else's kitchen, or somebody else's land, and never written a word. That knowledge is bone deep, and it informs everything I do" (Sanna 22).

Family unity provided a reliable and safe matrix. Morrison remembers the strength of her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, and speaks frequently about their behavior. The Willis family – her mother's – came from Alabama, her grandmother leaving home with seven children and 18 dollars, taking the train north; secretly, her husband joined them from Birmingham, where he worked as a violinist. In Morrison's words, "Since it was possible for my mother, my grandmother and her mother to do what they did, which to me is really scary, really scary – snatching children and roaming around in the night; running away from the South and living in Detroit, can't read or write; in a big city trying to stay alive and

keep those children when you can't even read the road signs – now, these are hard things to do" (Con I, 131). Her great-grandmother was a midwife, who stood six feet tall and whose skin was darker in color than that of the rest of the family. It is this group of women Morrison reveres. She describes them as "women who would run *toward* the situation rather than putting someone up in front of them, or retreating" (Con I, 54). Her mother was something of a social activist; Morrison recalls:

> My mother, when she would find out that they were not letting Black people sit in certain sections of the local theater, would go and sit in the white folks' section, go see *Superman* just so she could come out and say, "I sat there, so everybody else can too." It's a tradition … It's an old technique that black people use – you know, the first one in the pool, the first one in the school. (Con I, 134)

For much of Morrison's childhood, the Great Depression made money scarce. Although her father was ingenious about finding work, sometimes there was none to be had – then the Woffords (including the two sons born after Lois and Chloe) lived on welfare. Not to be pitied, Chloe's mother once wrote an angry letter to President Roosevelt, complaining about the quality of the food given to the poor (Matus 6). Eventually, George Wofford was working two union jobs, a situation that meant he could have lost both of them. When questioned, he explained that he needed every dollar for Lois's college education (with Chloe to start school immediately after her older sister), and the union officials gave him permission (Li 12).

At 12, Morrison herself went out to clean. Writing about that experience years after the fact, she described the day's experience: "The best news was the two dollars and fifty cents. Each Friday she would give me … enough money to see sixteen movies or buy fifty Baby Ruth candy bars. And all I had to do for it was clean her house for a few hours after school." Morrison really didn't know how to clean with the woman's new and fancy supplies – but she was unquestionably proud that she could give half her munificent earnings to her mother. As the weeks passed, her employer began offering Morrison used clothing as part of her pay – in time she learned how to refuse those items so that she still had her earnings. It was tiresome to see

her position, and her money, whittled away and so, eventually, she complained to her father. He advised her: "Listen. You don't live there. You live here. At home, with your people. Just go to work; get your money and come on home." Morrison translated this into several rules about work: "Whatever the work, do it well, not for the boss but for yourself." "Your real life is with us, your family." "You are not the work you do; you are the person you are" (Nonfiction 16–17).

As this anecdote shows, Morrison early learned the importance of work, of doing things the right way and to the best of her ability. This attitude was a part of the Willis–Wofford family tradition. When the economic depression eased and George Wofford was employed as a welder, he explained to Chloe that he sometimes signed the seam he had just completed. When she pointed out that no one would ever see that signature, he told her that it was important to *him* to claim that ownership (Con II, 14).

Whereas many of Morrison's reminiscences focus on her mother and grandmother, the presence of her stalwart father is never diminished. He was the family's best teller of ghost stories. In Morrison's recollections, she grew up being what she called "a radio child. You got in the habit of gathering information that way, and imagining the rest. You made it up" (Con I, 90). All her life, Morrison was a listener:

> In Lorain, Ohio, when I was a child, I went to school with and heard the stories of Mexicans, Italians, and Greeks, and I listened. I remember their language, and a lot of it is marvelous. But when I think of things my mother and father or aunts used to say, it seems the most absolutely striking thing in the world …. It's always seemed to me that black people's grace has been with what they do with language. (Con I, 45)

Within the Wofford home, everyone told stories. Critic Karla Holloway describes Morrison's comments about her families' narratives:

> The spoken library was … children's stories my family told, spirituals, the ghost stories, the blues, and folk tales and myths, and the everyday … instruction and advice, of my own people …. I wanted to write out of the matrix of memory, of recollection,

> and to approximate the sensual and visceral response I had to the world I live in … to recreate the civilization of Black people … the manners, judgments, values, morals. (Holloway, "Narrative Time" 104–5)

In the Wofford–Willis home, parents and grandparents also privileged dreams, and Chloe was an avid dreamer. Her grandmother thought her dreams were lucky, and frequently asked her about them: then she consulted the dream book, which charted dreams by a three-digit code that could be used for playing the numbers. Morrison explains:

> You dream about a rabbit, or death, or weddings, and their color made a difference – if you dreamed about dying in a white dress or a red dress – and weddings always meant death and death always meant weddings. I was very interested because she used to hit a lot on my dreams for about a year or two … Then I stopped hitting for her, so she stopped asking me. It was lovely to have magic that could turn into the pleasure of pleasing one's grandmother and was also profitable. My dream life is still so real to me that I can hardly distinguish it from the other. (Con I, 100)

More generally, Morrison remembers that "I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what 'really' happened. They had visitations and did not find that fact shocking and they had some sweet, intimate connections in things that were not empirically verifiable" (Con I, 226).

The Wofford household was also filled with music. Her grandfather played the violin by ear; her mother played the piano for silent movie houses (Con I, 283). Her mother also sang – sometimes for hours on end – moving from classical songs to jazz to spirituals to blues. (She sang regularly in the choir at the Greater St. Matthew A. M. E. Church' Con II, 210.) Chloe's family wanted her to take piano lessons but doing so confused her and made her feel "deficient" (and much less talented than her other family members) (Bigsby 262–4). So pervasive was her mother's singing that Morrison later compared the presence of song to meditation: "The singing and dancing that I remembered was not limited to entertainment; it was a kind of

meditation. I know that it's true in my own family because I came from people who sang all the time. It was a kind of talking to oneself musically." Morrison thought that her mother's constant singing, and the choices of the songs she chose, was "a kind of probing into something and then working it out, in addition to whatever release it provided. It had a great deal to do, actually, with my feeling that writing for me is an enormous act of discovery … It's a way of sustained problematizing for me, writing novels." (Con II, 136–37).

It was Morrison's mother, Ramah, who had graduated from high school, whereas her father had had to work so hard during his Virginia childhood that his formal education ended before twelfth grade. There was little question that Chloe would not only graduate high school, but that she would – like her uncle – attend college, and would become, with Lois, the first person in her immediate family to do so. To help her, Ramah took on a series of what Morrison called "humiliating jobs" – largely custodial – for extra money which she sent to her daughter at Howard University in Washington, DC.

Morrison attended Howard from 1949 to l953, majoring in English literature and minoring in classics. She joined a sorority and, in the words of Amiri Baraka, who was two years younger than she, was "one of the most beautiful women I'd ever seen" (Con II, 211). During several of those summers, she went south with the Howard Unity Players dramatic troupe; after her graduation, she went to Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, to get an MA degree in English. During her college years, everything that gave her comfort about Lorain, Ohio, disappeared: both the city of Washington and points south were visibly segregated. Morrison was suddenly all too aware that she was an African American woman, and on some occasions, that the most important fact about her was her skin color. As she insisted to Bigsby, during the years when she had lived in Lorain, "there was a lack of racial tension – being black was no worse than being Irish or Jewish." She continued, "I never believed I was inferior …. I thought I was interesting because my parents thought we were all interesting" (Bigsby 262, 265). But facing the punitive strictures of racial difference taught Morrison quickly.

Tranquil as she usually is when discussing race in Lorain, by the time Morrison becomes more candid, her personal bitterness surfaces. In a later interview, talking about the poverty of African American

children in the United States, she admits that she understands that life – "I have seen it and I know about it and I know when it doesn't work and I know in some instances why. When you haven't got the resources to get through it – it's not an easy life – it is NOT an easy life" – and such knowledge gave her much of the story of Pecola in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (Con II, 43). She describes the pain of coping with the racially divisive signs in DC; she also admits that on tours of the South, she sometimes did angry things:

> I can remember I hated New Orleans because they used to have these beautifully made wooden signs saying "coloreds only" that you could move, depending on who was getting on the bus. If there was a neighborhood where there were lots of white people, and a black person came on, you could take the sign and move it back or forward. I remember stealing one of those, at great pains and with a great deal of plotting with the other actors in the troupe, to take it home … once you have seen separate fountains and separate toilets in Washington, and I hadn't seen it before I got there, the South was an extension of that. (Bigsby 271)

After her two years of graduate study at Cornell, and her graduation with a Master's degree, Morrison returned to the South for a teaching position at Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. In this all-black school, she began to come into political consciousness. (Despite courses at Howard from noted African American poet Sterling Brown and Alain Locke, the creator of the rubric "the New Negro" and the "Harlem Renaissance," much of Morrison's college education was not marked by racial politics. That her lengthy MA thesis at Cornell focused on the way both William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf drew their "outsider" characters, such alienated figures as Septimus Smith in the latter's *Mrs Dalloway* or Quentin Compson in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom*!, again showed a consciousness based more on aesthetics than on race.) By 1957, Morrison had returned to Howard University to teach, and she stayed in that teaching position until 1964, through her marriage to Jamaican architect Harold Morrison, the birth of two sons, and her eventual divorce from Morrison.

During the early 1960s, however, it was hard to stay distant from African American politics. Among Morrison's students at Howard were Houston Baker, Jr., Andrew Young, Claude Brown,

and Stokely Carmichael, one of the founders of SNCC, The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Because her children were babies, she could not be politically prominent but she sometimes sat in on a writing group, along with the painter Charles Sebree and the playwright Owen Dodson (writing the story that would lead to her first novel). During later decades, when Morrison was asked about her absence from politics during the 1960s and the 1970s, she would admit, "I am really awful at organization. I do not show up and I have no good administrative skills and I really don't take orders well … I think I knew there was something an art form could do in that milieu that journalism and television could not. It could identify, it could interpret, it could clarify, it could pose all the right questions" (Bigsby 271).

By 1964, Morrison had returned home to live with her parents in Lorain. There she had help caring for the two little boys, one just a baby, and getting her divorce. The next year she applied for a job as a textbook editor in Syracuse, New York, and took that position with a subsidiary of Random House. She recalled "having a baby sitter during the day and coming home after 7:30 at night." Soon she and her boys were moving into the New York environs: Random House had offered her a position as an editor in New York. Although her mother worried because they had no immediate family in the city, Morrison found friends and supporters. And most of those friends and supporters were women.

Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, 1970

For a woman well trained in the study of literature, particularly in the mainstream texts of England, Italy, Germany, Russia, France, and – to a lesser extent – the United States, nothing in her classic preparation would have prepared Chloe Wofford Morrison to write a novel. Insistent as she was even early in this somewhat secretive endeavor, Morrison knew she wanted to write books that *African American* readers would want to know and study. The models for such books, however, were few. About the relevant writings by Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and a few other African American male writers, Morrison complained that they seemed to be writing sociology, explaining black lives to white readers, white *male* readers. As she later told Jean Strouse, "Those books and political

slogans about power were addressed to white men trying to explain or prove something to them. The fight was between men, for king of the hill" (Strouse 55).

Morrison wanted no part of such efforts. Her aim was to write about the reality of African American family lives, focusing where possible upon the mothers and daughters of those families. It was the lives of *women* that most fascinated Morrison. As she worked on *The Bluest Eye*, she saw that fiction as "something separate from the harangue and the confusion" that existed elsewhere in African American writing (Lanker 36).

The novel that became known as The *Bluest Eye* grew from Morrison's recollection of a beautiful black girl who was her friend in Lorain, Ohio. This girl had given up any belief in God because, as she told Chloe, she had prayed to Him for two years asking for blue eyes – and nothing had happened. Morrison remembers being shocked that this beautiful girl would have such a warped sense of what beauty was. (She had also joined the Catholic Church when she was 12, so perhaps her sense of what God might be asked to do was already well developed; Bigsby 269.)

As she wrote and rewrote the book during the evenings after her sons were in bed (and early in the mornings before they were awake), Morrison drew from what she as a youngster had experienced living in Ohio. She recalled, "I was very, very conscious of that mood and atmosphere of my hometown in the first book, *The Bluest Eye*. I used literal descriptions of neighborhoods … but the description of the house where we lived, the description of the streets, the lake [Lake Erie], and all of that is very much the way I remember Lorain" (Con I, 171). She also realized that no simple narrative would do justice to the complex story of physical beauty and its power in contemporary culture. In a later draft of the book, she added the characters of the MacTeer girls as her primary storytellers, and the MacTeer family, based visibly on her own parents, to the text. Then the story became a racial prolegomenon: the MacTeer family was stalwart and completely moral. The Breedlove family had drifted away from social conventions and had grown envious of all the trappings of *white* culture.

The Bluest Eye speaks to the lives of very young women, so crippled in their desires that they all appear to be victims. Pecola Breedlove, the most damaged of all, is never going to recover and even though readers appreciate the conscience of the MacTeer sisters, Frieda and

the younger Claudia, their grief over the fact that their communities of women have failed Pecola and her mother, Pauline Breedlove, creates a grim resonance around the story. Deprecation and abuse, regardless of the race of the oppressor, is a story no one wants to pass on. *The Bluest Eye* is a cautionary tale, and its presentation of real evil exists in the lack of parenting that both the Breedloves – Cholly as well as Pauline – experienced when they themselves were children. Torn from families that could have cared for them, placed in the deep poverty typical of the Southern migrant, the Breedloves are homeless when the story begins; they cannot care for their two children any better than their parents cared for them. The novel works in a downward and increasingly negative spiral.

Except for its bleak tone, *The Bluest Eye* might have fulfilled Morrison's early aim in her fiction. As she explained to Paul Gilroy, "I write what I think is of interest to black people … This is about me and you. I have to deliver something real" (Gilroy 177). Adding more description to that concept, Morrison noted, "I always wanted to read Black books in which I was enlightened, I as a Black person … There are not many books like that. … there are a lot of critics who believe that our books are there to tell them what our lives are all about" (Con II, 15).

Morrison explained her relative lack of self-consciousness about writing her first novel:

> I just didn't think anybody was ever going to do what I was doing. They couldn't judge me. Nobody was going to judge me, because they didn't know what I knew, and they weren't going to do it. No African American writer has ever done what I did, which was to write without the *white gaze*. This wasn't about them … I really felt original. I really did. I hate to admit that because it sounds so self-regarding. … There was nobody else who was going to make the center of the novel "the most helpless creature in the world: a little black girl who doesn't know anything, and who believes all that racist stuff, so *vulnerable*, so *nuts*." This was brand new space. (Con II, 252–3)

She had repeated to Jean Strouse, "When I wrote my first novel … I wanted to capture that same specificity about the nature and feeling of the culture I grew up in" (Strouse 53–4).

Because Pecola is raped by her father, among Morrison's 1970s readership – regardless of their skin color – *The Bluest Eye* was considered a sensational and sensationalized novel. Sabine Sielke, one of the foremost rape theorists of the feminist period, noted, largely on the basis of this novel, that Morrison was a pioneer in writing about "the incest trope": "Sexual violation looms large throughout Morrison's work, beginning with *The Bluest Eye*" (Sielke 152). Surrounded as Morrison's novel was by such mainstream (white) feminist novels as Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970), Sue Kaufman's *The Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (available in England in 1963 but in the States only after 1970), Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) and Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973), the fact that Morrison's first novel sold comparatively few copies meant that the marketing of African American fiction was to take a different route. Sad as Pecola's life is, mainstream readers did not want to read about the sorrows of poverty, especially poverty intensified in raced conditions. The comedy that infused much of this early feminist writing – particularly Jong's fiction – was absent in *The Bluest Eye*, though Morrison gave Mrs. MacTeer some scenes, and some language, that came close to humor.

Morrison also made Cholly Breedlove a complex figure. Deprived as he had himself been by his loss of parents, and by his being forced by the "whitemen" to rape Darlene, Cholly seemed unclear about both his act – of raping his daughter – and his motivation for that act. Years later, in Morrison's "Afterword" to the reprinting of the novel, she suggested that part of her dissatisfaction with *The Bluest Eye* lay in the fact that Cholly's brutal act against his helpless child should have been seen as a reflection of his own powerlessness, as he was forced to perform sexually in the glare of the white men's flashlights: "connecting Cholly's 'rape' by the whitemen to his own of his daughter" ("Afterword" 215). Donald B. Gibson was one of the earliest observers to see Cholly's complexity; he went against the usual negative readings of this character by connecting Cholly's rape of Pecola with his earlier love for Pauline. He pointed out, "It would be on the whole easier to judge Cholly if we knew less about him and if we could isolate the kitchen floor episode from the social context in which it occurs and from Cholly's past. But we cannot; we are neither invited to nor allowed …" (Gibson 170).