The critical reception of Toni Morrison: 1970 to 1988

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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1970 TO 1988

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1970 TO 1988

Advisor: Professor Elizabeth Higgins

Dissertation dated December 1989

This study examines the critical reception of Toni Morrison's novels from 1970 to 1988. During this eighteen-year period, Toni Morrison published five novels: The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), and Beloved (1987). In this study the criticism is divided into five periods, each beginning with the publication of a novel.

This study contends that Toni Morrison's novels draw on three convergent literary traditions for ideas, meanings and structures. Consequently, as the critics respond to the novels, a pattern of criticism emerges from each tradition. The critical responses to the novels can be placed within three schools of criticism--those responses arising from Euro-Americans, those arising from Afro-Americans, and those arising from feminists drawn from both groups. Each school of criticism reflects a structure of beliefs and values which transcend literary judgments. Each critic's response grows naturally out of his respective tradition. Consequently, this study can be placed within the significantly large body of literature which suggests the sociological nature of criticism.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1970 TO 1973</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1974 TO 1977</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1978 TO 1981</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1982 TO 1986</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1987 TO 1988</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is a contemporary African-American female writer whose novels have been discussed often in contemporary literary criticism in the United States. Between 1970 and 1987, she published five novels. Today, Morrison is a Pulitzer Prize-winning author with five novels to her credit. They are The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), and Beloved (1987). There is also a dramatic work, Dreaming Emmett, which was produced in 1986. Song of Solomon was awarded the National Book Critics' Circle Award as the best work of fiction for the year 1977, and Beloved was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988.

Morrison was near middle age before she started writing novels. When Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931 she was given the name Chloe Anthony Wofford. Born in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison was the second of four children of George and Ramah Wofford. In 1949 Morrison graduated from the Lorain Public Schools and entered Howard University, where she earned a B.A. degree in 1953. Two years later, Morrison took an M.A. in English from Cornell University. After earning the M.A. degree, Morrison taught English for a number of years at both Texas Southern and Howard University. In 1967 she became a senior

editor at Random House, where she divided her time between editing and writing. Morrison's writings have generated a considerable volume of criticism that merits an examination.

The primary purpose of this study is to survey, analyze and evaluate the criticism of Toni Morrison's five novels. This dissertation will assess the critical reception of Morrison's novels from 1970 to 1988. The years 1970 to 1988 mark the period from the publication of Morrison's first novel until a year after the publication of her fifth novel. These years will include most of the critical material to date on the novels. The critical material includes a book of critical essays, several dissertations, critical essays in anthologies, book reviews and many magazine, journal and newspaper articles.

Within the body of critical material, the critics have examined several different aspects of Morrison's novels. For example, some critics chose to expound on Morrison's characters and her process of developing characters and how she makes them come alive. Other critics chose to discuss such elements as symbolism, psychological disorientation, the grotesque, the quest for identity, the novelist's use of language and Morrison's story-telling technique. It appears that with each succeeding novel which Morrison has published the critics have tended to find more elements to scrutinize. As each new novel was published, critics explained that Morrison got progressively better at the craft of novel writing. While most critics prior to 1973 acknowledged that The Bluest Eye was a serious novel, it was after the publication of Sula that the critics generally concurred
that Morrison was a serious writer, and as a serious writer Morrison was examined more carefully.

After *Song of Solomon*, Morrison was not only taken very seriously and therefore analyzed more carefully and more extensively by critics, but she also gained some financial security. Then, with the publication of *Tar Baby*, Morrison appeared on the cover of the March 31, 1981 issue of *Newsweek* magazine. Some critics argued that Morrison's fourth novel was evidence that the novelist had matured, perhaps because she had now effectively included some white characters in her book.

Inevitably, each critic's response to the novels must be founded (consciously or unconsciously) on an ideology that provides a structure of beliefs and values which transcend specifically literary judgments. Consequently, the first question is: can the varied analyses of Morrison's novels be perceived as ideological discourse responding to the conscious or unconscious perceptions and values which the critics find in the novels themselves? Secondly, is Toni's Morrison's critical acclaim the result of the novelist's ability to appeal to three distinct ideologies current in the 1970's and the 1980's? That is, can the critical reception be categorized as Afro-American, Euro-American, or feminist? Like other contemporary Afro-American writers, Toni Morrison's writings seem to emerge out of these three distinctly different, but demonstrably related, American literary traditions. While Morrison's novels are different in many ways, they are also bound to the ideas and concepts of a long line of Afro-American writers that extends back to the slave narratives. However, the Afro-American literary tradition is embedded in the Euro-American
literary tradition. Also, there is the more recent, but still very important, feminist tradition in American literature. Obviously, both men and women also write in the traditions.

This study hypothesizes that Toni Morrison's five novels drew on these convergent American literary traditions for ideas, meaning and structure. Moreover, the critics' responses must be analyzed within this context. While the three traditions have been discussed at length and are well documented elsewhere, a brief summary here, which will also serve as part of the theoretical framework for this study, would be helpful.

Of the three literary traditions, perhaps Euro-American is the most widely discussed, written about and even understood. The Euro-American literary tradition is usually referred to as simply American literature. However, the term Euro-American will be used throughout this study to emphasize the important difference between American writers with a European heritage and American writers with an African heritage, for American literature is often thought to be only an offspring of English literature. At any rate, when one talks about the literature of England, America, or any other nation, one is talking about a national literature that captures the spirit, the soul or the ideals of a people. In the case of American literature the people have different heritages and backgrounds; therefore, they also have different ideals. Thus, we have Afro-American and Euro-American literatures, as well as others.

In the writings of Cotton Mather, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, Stephen Crane, Samuel Clemens, Robert Frost and many
others, one would find American ideals expressed from a European perspective. That is, while this cadre of American writers possess distinctly American characteristics, the European influence since birth is inescapable, and is inevitably expressed in their writings. Embedded in American letters are ideals that can be traced to the Old World. Therefore, these writers are forever linked to their European cultural background. Writings from the pre-national period to the present are included in this tradition. There are literally thousands of anthologies that include representative works written in this tradition.

By and large, the experiences of Afro-Americans in America have not been the same as those of Euro-Americans. Over the centuries, a body of literature has emerged that has captured the different experiences and ideals of Afro-Americans. This body of literature is still somewhat obscure and less recognized by Euro-Americans, as well as by many Afro-Americans.

In The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition, Bernard Bell pointed out that there was a pattern of conditions and circumstances that gave root to Afro-American writings, particularly the novel. Obviously, the same is true for Euro-American writings, but here Bell is talking about different sets of conditions and circumstances. For the Afro-Americans the pattern was this. Bell wrote that:

The network of understanding that defines black American culture and informs black American consciousness has evolved from the unique pattern of experiences of Africa, the trans-Atlantic middle passage, slavery, Southern Plantation tradition, emancipation, Reconstruction, Post Reconstruction, northern migration, urbanization, and racism have produced a
residue of shared memories and frames of references for Black Americans." 2

In general, these "shared memories" yield the subject matter of much of the writings in the Afro-American tradition. These collective experiences gave rise to a literary tradition in fiction that at first manifested itself in slave narratives and later in novels. Slave narratives are detailed accounts of personal struggles and suffering told by slaves or former slaves. Some of the slave narratives are of great literary value. For example, the Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, An American Slave and Our Nig; or, Sketches From the Life of a Free Black have significant literary value in terms of style and tone as well as being cultural and historical documents of "shared experiences" of Afro-Americans. In her detailed discussion of the development of slave narratives in Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives, Frances Smith Foster pointed out that slave narratives as a genre had their heyday between 1831 and 1865 and that the genre was the "archetype" for chronicling the "heritage" of the Afro-American experience. 3 Foster explained that basically "the slave narratives are concerned with the movement from enslavement to freedom." 4

After the effective use of the genre of slave narratives to express their "shared experience," writers in the Afro-American


4Ibid., 84.
tradition began to publish novels in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Bernard Bell and others agree that William Wells Brown's *Clotel* was the first published black American novel. After Brown, many writers in the Afro-American tradition used the genre of the novel to express their ideas. The list includes writers such as Frank Webb, Harriette Wilson, Martin Delany, Frances Harper, Sutton Griggs, Charles Chestnutt, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, William DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, Zora Neal Hurston, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Rudolph Fisher, George Schuyler, Wallace Thurman, Richard Wright, Anne Petry, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and many others. Today, the novel is still widely used for the expression of ideas concerning the shared experiences of Afro-Americans. There were, however, significant differences in the way writers in the Afro-American tradition perceived the "shared memories" as well as differences in the way they represented them in their writings. Trudier Harris pointed out in *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Ritual* that "all writers in this tradition may not have been aware of their position as being traditional, but all have shown that black heritage, through black history, is a continuing and integral part of black existence ..."6

In addition to the Euro-Americans' and the Afro-Americans' shared experiences, women have also had experiences and "shared memories"

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5 Bell., 38-45.

that are exclusively theirs. Consequently, a body of writings emerged decrying the thwarting of the personhood of women in American society. This focus is often referred to as the feminist position. The feminist position is clear: it is an attempt to inspire women to become more aware of themselves and to find a more inclusive niche in a society that has denied them an expansive place. This position among white American women writers is well documented in the literature. Nevertheless, within this vast body of literature by and about white American women, Afro-American women are all too often simply mentioned in passing. So the discussion of the feminist position in this study will be skewed toward the Afro-American woman, for the criticism reveals that this is the feminist position Toni Morrison is concerned with. That is to say, the experiences of black women in America have been vastly different from those of white women in America. In fact, even white women in America have not acknowledged the full personhood of Afro-American women. Hazel V. Carby pointed toward this fact in Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Novelist.

Popular white women novelists often used their text to explore the boundaries of the cult of true womanhood and to challenge some of the most confusing situations in definitions of female sexuality. A close reading of these books reveals that this process of questioning the ideology only applied to the white female characters; black women in those texts exist only to confirm their own lack of womanly attributes in contrast to the abundance of virtues in their mistresses. The Afro-American woman's feminist position speaks out against derogatory dimensions of her life in other respects as well as sex.

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Unlike white women, the Afro-American woman must also combat both racism and classism. Barbara Christian aptly described the predicament of the Afro-American woman:

The respectable, the desired concept of woman in the society, then, is not only sexist and racist, it is also classist. And because black women were, by nature of their race, conceived of as lower class, they could hardly approximate the norm. They had to work; most could not be ornamental or withdrawn from the world; and, according to the aesthetics of this country, they were not beautiful. But neither were they men. Any aggressiveness or intelligence on their part, qualities necessary for participation in the work world, were construed as unwomanly and tasteless; on the other hand, they were biologically females, with all the societal restrictions associated with that state.8

Sex, race, and class are the three important "organically connected" elements that the Afro-American woman's feminist position is concerned with.

It is clear, as Keith Byerman stated, that the tradition of black women writers shows a definite bent toward "feminist ideology." The writers "tell stories of the initiation of black girls into womanhood, defining the process of the complex meaning of being black and female in a culture that has denigrated both qualities."9

This study will approach the criticism by first considering these three perspectives of which both Toni Morrison and the critics are keenly aware. The criticism appears in five significant categories of publications. These categories are significant because the critical attitude as well as the critical assessment varies from category to


category. The categories of publications the criticism appears in are:

1. Articles primarily or exclusively about Toni Morrison which appeared in academic journals in the United States
2. Article-length selections that appeared in popular journals
3. Significant book reviews which appeared in major journals, magazines and newspapers
4. Essays which appeared in critical anthologies, including one devoted exclusively to Toni Morrison
5. Dissertations which included Morrison's novels in the discussion

This study will attempt to be comprehensive in its examination of all such categories.

In this body of critical writing, the critical concerns for this study will ultimately be defined by the materials examined. However, the dominant subjects are the following:

1. characterization
2. theme
3. setting
4. symbolism
5. mythology
6. style
7. language
8. morality
9. culture
10. socialization

This study will employ the survey method, which includes collecting, analyzing, and evaluating the critical material. The criticism will be examined in chronological periods commencing with the publication of each new novel. That is, the critical material
which appeared from 1970 to 1973 will be analyzed first, then the criticism from 1974 to 1977, next the criticism from 1978 to 1981, the critical material from 1982 to 1986 and, finally, the material from 1987 to 1988. This research design will reveal more clearly the subtle, but significant, changes in the reception of Toni Morrison's novels.

In each period, the criticism will be analyzed and evaluated according to four types of variables:

1. The publication that the criticism appeared in and the intended audience or audiences that the publication targeted. What were the relevant characteristics of the intended audience or audiences? What assumptions did the critic and the audience seem to share? How did those assumptions influence the critical response? What were the ideologies of the critic? What were the ideologies of the audience? What were the ideologies discussed in the novel?

2. Literary elements and social and cultural concerns. What were the aspects of the novels discussed in the criticism? What were the social and cultural concerns discussed in the criticism? Were there important elements and concerns omitted by the critics? On what elements and concerns did critics of the period agree or disagree?

3. The critic and his judgement. Was the critical judgment positive or negative? Was the critic's response substantiated by the text?

4. The changes in the critical responses from one novel to the next. How did the critical responses change after the publication of Sula; after Song of Solomon; after Tar Baby; and after Beloved?
It was between 1970 and 1973 that the first wave of criticism of Toni Morrison appeared in print. The first series of critical responses were to her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. For the plot of her first novel, Toni Morrison worked and reworded a short story written (but not published) earlier into a short novel which was published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. in 1970. As a former English teacher (for when the novel was published, Morrison was an editor at Random House), one might guess that Toni Morrison had long aspired to become a writer. Some English teachers do aspire to become writers, but most fail miserably. However, Morrison's short novel received some excellent reviews initially in some prestigious publications. Undoubtedly this proved both encouraging and inspiring for the budding novelist. As a first novel, *The Bluest Eye* received only a modest amount of attention, but through the attention the book did generate, the critics immediately pointed toward Morrison's skill and talent. Between the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970 and the publication of *Sula*, Morrison's second novel, in 1973, the critical responses appeared only in the form of book reviews, and the book reviews were short.

Many of the reviewers responded to Morrison's terse and cogent...
plot, which is infused with much pathos. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison told the story of Pecola Breedlove's gradual descent into total madness. Her incurable madness is caused by circumstances beyond Pecola's control. The novel is divided into four parts and each part bears the title of a season of the year.

Part one is a series of recollections and vignettes narrated either by Claudia MacTee, an eleven-year-old child, or by an omniscient narrator. The novelist arranges the vignettes so that they advance the plot. Morrison made the artistic decision to let Claudia, the child, help tell the story. For this novel, that choice appears to be effective. Claudia introduces the reader to the main character, Pecola Breedlove, and she further relates the reasons why Pecola comes to live in the MacTee household, Claudia's home. Claudia says that Pecola was a "case" or "a girl who had no place to go. The county had placed her in our house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or, more precisely, until the family was reunited."1 "Reunited" because Pecola and the entire Breedlove family is "outdoors" because Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, has burned the family's house down. The Breedloves were "poor and black" and therefore lived in a "storefront" house. Morrison has the omniscient narrator describe this dwelling in vivid detail.

It was in that storefront dwelling that the drunkard Cholly Breedlove physically and emotionally abused his wife, Polly Breedlove, and his two children, Sammy and Pecola. Cholly "poured out on her

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1Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 17. All further page references to this work will be noted in the text.
[his wife] the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires."
(p. 37) It is precisely this violence that eventually causes Sammy to flee from the storefront house; but Pecola, "restricted by her youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance." (p. 38) Claudia reveals that later, even in the MacTeer's house, Pecola must still endure humiliation.

The second part is titled, "Winter," and it is composed actually of only two very brief vignettes, the first of which is narrated by the child Claudia; it relates how Pecola Breedlove is first fascinated by Maureen Peal and in turn, how Pecola is humiliated by the same Maureen Peal. Maureen appears to be everything that Pecola wants to be, so when Maureen retorts, "I am cute! And you ugly," Pecola is devastated. At these words, Pecola "seemed to fold into herself like a pleated wing." (p. 61)

In the second scene of the second part of the novel, the omniscient narrator relates the story of Geraldine, a middle-class black woman who has lost her "funkiness." (p. 68). This scene is included to contrast Pecola's background with that of the middle-class upbringing of Geraldine and her son, Louis Junior. Geraldine herself makes the distinction clear: "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud." (p. 71) Geraldine and Louis Junior are the former and Pecola is the latter. In this scene, Geraldine returns home one afternoon to find Pecola, who had been enticed into the house by Louis Junior. Geraldine's disdain for everything Pecola represented to her surfaced: "'Get out'; she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty little bitch. Get out of my house.'" (p. 75) Again, Pecola is humiliated and recoils within herself.
The third and longest part is entitled, "Spring." As compared to the others, there are three lengthy vignettes in this part. One is about the life of Polly Breedlove, one recounts the story of Cholly, and a third describes Soaphead Church, the spiritual healer.

Polly Breedlove was born Pauline Williams, whose family moved from Alabama to Kentucky when she was a girl. The reader learns of those better days many years ago, when Pauline and Cholly had "loved each other." They were married and later migrated to Lorain, Ohio. Their relationship, once beautiful, deteriorated over the years to a cruel state of physical and emotional brutality. The cause of the breakdown was a combination of loneliness, poverty, ignorance and fear. These destructive feelings and ordeals were passed on to the children, Sammy and Pecola. Into Pauline's daughter, "she beat fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life." (p. 102)

Much like that of Pauline Breedlove, Cholly's life was also filled with one rejection or disappointment after another. Cholly was "abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father; there was nothing more to lose." (p. 176) Eventually, the pathetic and repulsive Cholly Breedlove impregnates his daughter.

So it was a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen... The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt of desire ran down his genitals, giving it length, and softening the lips of his anus. Surrounding all of this lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon. (p. 128)

After Pecola was impregnated by her father, she would face the ultimate
humiliation—that of bearing a child begotten by her father. This is unbearable for the child, so Pecola goes over into madness. It is the spiritual healer, Soaphead Church, who validates Pecola's blue eyes in her own mind.

Part Four is a short and confusingly anticlimatic scene. In it Pecola is completely insane.

The initial critical responses to Toni Morrison's first novel were positive. For this novel, the critical material can be placed in two different categories: criticism in publications derived from the Euro-American outlook and criticism in publications drawn from the Afro-American perspective. While both were generally positive, the emphasis was different.

Two of the earliest reviews of The Bluest Eye appeared in Kirkus Reviews. One review appeared in August of 1970 and another appeared in September of the same year. Kirkus Reviews is a semi-monthly publication with very short book reviews of just-published books. The publication is edited by Alice E. Woff and the reviews are categorized. For example, in the August 15, 1970 issue, book reviews are under a heading entitled, "Picture Books," "Books to Read Aloud," "Easy Reading," "Younger Fiction," "Fiction," and other headings. The Bluest Eye is listed under the "Fiction" heading. The publication is not targeted for a mass audience; it appears to be directed toward booksellers. The first review of Morrison's novel is only about 150 words in length. The review does not discuss the novel (this is not the purpose of the publication), but simply gives a synopsis of its plot. The review highlights Pecola's ostracism, her rape and her madness. The tone of the review essentially says that the novel is a
good read. Book dealers would want to add this novel to their collection as a result of reading this review. There is an indirect statement about the writing ability of Morrison. The last sentence of the review notes that the novel is "a skillful, understated tribute to the fall of a sparrow for whose small tragedy there was no watching eye." This review indicates that the novelist does indeed have talent. Notwithstanding the review's intention to be brief, Pecola's plight is not fully understood and the reviewer is unsympathetic toward her. There are also other problems. For example, Morrison's character's name is Pecola, not "Pecora," and there is nothing "small" about her "tragedy." Then Pecola is referred to as "sparrow," not a human being.

In the September 15, 1970 issue of Kirkus Reviews, The Bluest Eye is reviewed under the heading "Adult Books Suggested for Young Adult Consideration." The identical review from the August issue is reprinted. The assumption here is that the tragic and heartfelt story of the twelve-year-old Pecola would appeal to teenagers and young adults as well as to mature adults. Again, this is an indirect statement by the publication that Morrison is in command of her material, for many of the world's greatest writers appeal to both the mature mind and to young adults. For example, Swift's Gulliver's Travels appeals to all ages.


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3Ibid.
issue of Publishers Weekly, which bills itself as the international news magazine of book publishing. Like the Kirkus Reviews, the audience for this magazine is sophisticated. This review is also only about 150 words long. As most book reviews do, this review recaptures some essential elements of the plot, but it goes farther in praise of Toni Morrison. The review says, "Miss Morrison writes with compassion ... of black life in middle America." And that Morrison's treatment of some of her characters was "especially moving." 4

The November 1, 1970 issue of Liberty Journal also included a review of Morrison's first novel. It was about the same length as the others, but this review has even higher praises for Toni Morrison. The review says that Morrison "is also adept in the presentation of characters" and that her "dialogue is well placed and rhythmically authentic" and that her writing "embodies a reality." 5 This trade publication recommended the novel for young adults, social case workers and public libraries.

With these three short but rather positive reviews, the word was out to those in the book publishing and book trading businesses that this was a book that would sell, as well as a book that has a message. What the message is and what it signifies would be left for others to write about.

As for newspapers in the United States, the New York Times is, beyond question, the most prestigious newspaper in the country. In fact, only the Times of London ranks with it in the English-speaking

world. The New York Times Book Review is a supplement to the Sunday edition of the New York Times. As the most prestigious newspaper in America, the Times is directed toward a fairly sophisticated audience. Likewise, the New York Times Book Review enjoys a wide readership of fairly sophisticated readers. As for book sales in the United States, the New York Times Book Review is extremely powerful. In essence, positive reviews in this publication greatly enhance a writer's reputation. Conversely, a negative initial review can immensely damage a budding writer's reputation, or even his career. Indeed, much of Toni Morrison's early reputation, and even achievement, may be directly attributed to an early positive review in the New York Times Book Review. In the November 1, 1970 edition of the New York Times Book Review, Frankel reviewed The Bluest Eye. This was the first review that attempted to go beyond mere plot summary and actually analyze the novel. Haskel Frankel is a critic by profession; he is a book critic for The National Observer. Frankel's review was upbeat and positive. And this positive introduction to a larger public would only help Morrison's career as a writer. Mr. Frankel told his many readers that Morrison was "a writer of considerable power and tenderness, someone who can cast back to the living, bleeding heart of childhood and capture it on paper," and "Given a scene that demands a writer's best, Miss Morrison responds with control and talent." Frankel ended his review by saying that Morrison was "a writer to seek out and to encourage." 6

While the review is very brief and there is no in-depth analysis, the reviewer did indicate that the book is a "telling statement on the tragic effect of race prejudice on [black] children." Within a few days a second review of the novel appeared in The New York Times. On November 13, 1970, John Leonard's review was published in the daily Times. Leonard lavished the highest praise yet on Morrison. Leonard wrote that Morrison's prose was so good that "the novel become poetry." Leonard added that "The Bluest Eye is also history, sociology, folklore, nightmare and music." While Leonard's review of The Bluest Eye is brief, his voice as a critic is authoritative.

The relatively obscure first novel by a former English teacher and current editor got more attention when the November 30, 1970 issue of Newsweek magazine included a review of it by Raymond A. Sokolor. Newsweek is one of many weekly news magazines that are popular and are read regularly by a vast number of people in the general public. The reviewer praised Morrison for writing in a "private tone" which is unlike "much black writing." The implication here is that Morrison is a better writer because she stands apart from most black writers.

Other book reviews very similar in tone, length and content appeared in publications such as the New Yorker (January 23, 1971), Booklist (May, 1971), and Choice (October, 1971).

While almost all of the criticism was remarkably positive for

7Ibid.


Morrison's first novel, "The Bluest Eye was not flawless," as was pointed out in the January 23, 1971 issue of the New Yorker. The same review said that The Bluest Eye "has an occasional error of fact or judgment" and "an occasional false or bombastic line."10

The book reviews of The Bluest Eye that appeared in print between 1970 and 1973 can be placed in two categories. While on the surface all of the criticism would appear to be the same, a more careful examination will reveal that the nature of the criticism that appeared in publications controlled and basically written by Euro-Americans is distinctly different from that which appeared in publications controlled and written by Afro-Americans. Between 1970 and 1973, no feminist perspective was offered. However, in the years to follow, feminist criticism of The Bluest Eye would emerge.

The critics that published reviews in publications from each category realized that by and large their readers shared their values and the values and ideas that the publications espoused. The reviews that appeared in all of the publication above have ideologies that are skewed toward the Euro-American value system. In essence, they are addressing white Americans. One way to determine whom a publication is basically addressing itself is to notice the advertisements that appear in the publication. But one can also surmise the intended audience by examining the tone, style, and presentation of the message by the reviewer. In the reviews above, the reviewers commented on aspects such as Morrison's tone, writing, style, storytelling techniques, and talent. After all, these are esthetic matters that

10Ibid.
are highly valued and much discussed in literary criticism in the Euro-American tradition. There is almost no discussion of Morrison's message in the early critical responses in these publications. Could this be because Morrison's message in *The Bluest Eye* is disquieting because it is an outcry against racism and any discussion of this subject induces guilt for Euro-Americans? However, subsequent reviews by these publications did address the message in this novel and in Morrison's subsequent novels.

On the other hand, reviews that appeared in publications intended mainly for Afro-American were different. While they also highlighted matters of style and talent, they also emphasized the message in the novel and its implications. The reviewers seemed to be able to identify with Morrison's characters and her message. For example, a review in *Essence* magazine by Sharyn J. Skeeter in January of 1971 stated: "We can 'feel' the characters and their situations." The "we" are Afro-Americans. Of course, *Essence* is a monthly publication that targets specifically Afro-American women. However, this particular review has no feminist overtone. *Essence* was one of the first Afro-American publications to review and recommend the novel to black readers. The *Essence* review, unlike those with a Euro-American worldview, immediately pointed out that the Breedlove's tragic situation arise "because of direct, as well as subtle, racism." The *Essence* readers will not respond to the term "racism" with guilt, but rather will feel vindicated.

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Similarly, in the May 1971 issue of Black World, the critic speaks of Morrison as "Sister Toni." This suggests a deep understanding of and close association with the author and her work. While Black World's principal readers were probably fewer in number than those of Essence, they had a higher level of education and a deeper understanding of racial problems. So the writer is unabashedly direct in using pronouns such as "we," "us" and "ourselves."  

It is the racial problems that the novel addresses that the reviewer emphasizes. Ruby Dee's review of the novel in Freedomways (Third Quarter, 1971) is similar, and the reviewer says that after reading the novel, "My heart hurts." Dee makes it clear that her reaction to the novel is in large part due to the fact that Morrison is not simply talking about a poor black girl, but that the novelist is discussing Afro-American heritage. Dee says that Morrison's characters "are the kind of people that all black people know of--or are--to varying degrees." However, the review that appears in the College Language Association Journal (December 1971) points out that, while racism is a factor in Pecola's undoing, it is not the only factor. This journal, which is directed primarily toward Afro-American intellectuals, attempts to examine all aspects of the novel.

In summary, the evaluation of the criticism of Toni Morrison's first novel reveals that two schools of criticism emerged. These

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12Ibid.


schools emerged out of existing literary traditions—the Euro-American tradition and the Afro-American tradition. In the Euro-American tradition, the critics' discussions are left on the plane of traditional literary elements such as tone, style, narrative techniques and other elements. On the other hand, critics from the Afro-American tradition seemed to emphasize the message and its implications as well as some traditional literary elements. By 1973, the feminist tradition has yet to emerge as a distinguishable school of criticism. It is only after the publication of *Sula* that critics begin to place Morrison in the feminist tradition. *Sula* will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER II

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1974 to 1977

The primary objective of this chapter is to examine the criticism of Toni Morrison from 1974 to 1977. Most of the criticism generated during this period pertains to *Sula*, Morrison's second novel. However, since many of the critics chose to discuss *Sula* in relation to Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, this chapter will also examine the criticism of the *Bluest Eye* since 1973. While discussing *Sula* almost all of the critics found it necessary at least to mention *The Bluest Eye*, however briefly. In fact, some critics found it next to impossible to analyze *Sula* outside of the context of *The Bluest Eye*. After the examination of the criticism of *Sula*, the critical assertions concerning *The Bluest Eye* since 1973 that are significantly different from the assertions before 1973 will be presented here.

Even though *The Bluest Eye* is mentioned often in the criticism during this period, there are only a few statements that are significantly different from those already in Chapter One.

While the criticism between 1974 and 1977 differs from that of the earlier period (1970 to 1973), in that the focus is on *Sula*, the form in which the criticism appears remains primarily the same. That is, the criticism appears for the most part in the form of book reviews in popular magazines and newspapers. However, a noticeable
difference begins to take shape. A few articles that are somewhat longer and broader in scope appear in publications that can be thought of as more scholarly. That is, these publications target as their audiences academics and scholars. An example is an article which appeared in Cross Currents (Fall 1976) that went beyond the delineation of plot and characterization in Sula by attempting to put the novel in the perspective of "the Afro-American novelistic tradition."¹ This article by Cynthia J. Smith, entitled "Black Fiction by Black Females," compared Sula to Alice Walker's Meridian (published in 1976) to show how these two novels by black women deviate from the tradition of male Afro-American writers like Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison in particular. Cynthia J. Smith states that, "In Sula and Meridian, the authors boldly explore special historical times and special places through the eyes of their major characters."² Unlike many of the very short book reviews of one paragraph to a few paragraphs in length, Smith's article is four pages long. Likewise, there is a four-page article by Barbara Smith in Freedomways (vol. 14, no. 1, 1974). This article argues that Sula is in the feminine literary tradition. Part of Barbara Smith's argument that Morrison's "perspective is undeniably feminine" is based on what Smith sees as one of the governing themes of the novel. Smith asserts that a major theme is "the link between Black women who share each

²Ibid., 340.
Indeed, the uncommon and exceptional relationship between Sula and Nel is evidence of "the link between Black women who share each other's lives." In addition, there are special bonds between Hannah and Eva, Hannah and Sula, and Nel and Helene. These relationships help to justify Smith's assertion.

In general, the criticism of Toni Morrison during this period was favorable. Indeed, it can be said that *Sula* was critically acclaimed. Many critics heaped detailed praise on Morrison. Since she was now recognized as a writer of considerable talent, some critics expected greater works. However, there were a very few critics who pointed out imperfections in Morrison's writing and saw *Sula* as basically a failure. Then there was the more typical critic who saw Morrison as an excellent writer, and who viewed *Sula* as an exceptional book, but who pointed toward a few shortcomings in the novel.

Almost all the critics acknowledged that *Sula* was both an entertaining and a serious novel. In *Sula*, Toni Morrison narrates the story of the development and the dissolution of the profound friendship between two black girls—Sula Mae Peace and Nell Wright. The novel traces the lives of these two characters from childhood to adulthood to Sula's death. The novel covers the years from 1919 to 1965. While this is quite a number of years to cover, the novel is not lengthy at all. In fact, at 174 pages, it is very short by current standards, since Morrison does not account for lengthy periods of time in the lives of these two major characters. For example, the

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ten years extending between Part One and Part Two are not accounted for, and are not actually essential for the further development of the novel.

In an attempt to define the central message of Sula, critics sought to explain many elements of the novel. Often included in the discussion are racism and characterization, but one of the most frequently discussed elements is the friendship of Sula and Nel. A reviewer in Library Journal states this clearly, as other critics do also. The reviewer indicates that Sula is "a fascinating study of the friendship of two young black women."4 In the novel, Sula and Nel's backgrounds are somewhat different. While their backgrounds are somewhat different, both girls nonetheless are rooted in the black community. When they first met, they became instant and tenacious friends for almost an entire lifetime. Sula, the only daughter of Hannah (a woman who "rippled with sex" and "refused to live without the attention of a man"5), grew up in the free, spontaneous and undisciplined household of her grandmother, Eva. On the other hand, Nel's mother, Helene Wright, "never turned her head in church when latecomers arrived" and was the epitome of self-discipline. (p. 42) She set the environment in which Nel grew up. Sula and Nel provide the conflict within Morrison's novel. However, many other colorful characters appear in the novel, but they are not fully developed, perhaps with the exception of Shadrack, a demented war veteran.


5Toni Morrison, Sula (New York: New American Library, 1973), 42. All other citations of this volume will be noted in the text.
In addition to the critical discussions of the elements of theme and characters, some critics state that the setting of the novel is also important. Consequently, the setting is discussed as if it were a character. A review in Choice (March 1974) states that "one suspects that the author is as concerned with place as with people; the black hill settlement, high above an Ohio river, emerges as a third protagonist." The novel is divided into two parts, but begins with a brief prologue that describes the natural setting and gives some history of the community. Here Morrison describes how the black neighborhood, the Bottom, got its name. The reader will quickly realize that this will be a novel about the people of the Bottom.

Much of the criticism of Sula is in response to the power of Morrison's narrative skills. A reviewer in Kirkus Reviews (November 1, 1973) is one of several reviewers to say that in Sula one finds a "deceptively gentle narrative" and there is "dialogue that virtually speaks from the page." This review recounts the plot of the narrative. Almost all of the reviewers include a plot summary, as it facilitates their analyses. The first chapter is entitled "1919," and the reader learns how Shadrack instituted National Suicide Day, which fell on the third of each January. Shadrack was a World War I veteran who was devastated by the human suffering of that war. On the battlefield, Shadrack had witnessed death up close, as he "saw the face of a soldier near him fly off." (p. 8) This and other similar experiences had left Shadrack "crazy" and, in a "struggle to order and

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7Kirkus Reviews 41 (November 1, 1973): 1225.
focus experience, he instituted National Suicide Day" (p. 8) after he returned from the war to the Bottom. In response to his fear of death and dying, Shadrack rationalized that "if one day a year were devoted to [death], everybody would get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free." (p. 8) Actually, as the years went by, "Suicide Day became a part of the fabric of life up in the Bottom of Medallion, Ohio." (p. 14) However, at the end of the first chapter, it is not totally clear how or why this story about Shadrack is important. Commenting on Morrison's narrative skills, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt says in The New York Times (January 7, 1974) that: "The trouble is, Miss Morrison gives one the feeling that she has written each of her scenes from scratch—that is, that none of them have anything much to do with the ones that preceded them." However, in the Morrisonian manner all of the "scenes" seem to cohere, as the reader finds out more about Shadrack later in the novel. Indeed, other critics saw inadequacies in Sula, but none concurred with Lehmann-Haupt's total dismissal of the novel. 8

Morrison dated the second chapter "1920," for it was in that year that Helene Wright and her only daughter, Nel, left Ohio on a train bound for New Orleans. Helene's grandmother, who had raised her, was now dead. Helene Wright had been born in New Orleans, the "daughter of a Creole whore." (p. 17) It was some years later that Helene would migrate to Medallion, Ohio to live. In Medallion, Helene "was an impressive woman" who "won all social battles with presence and

conviction of the legitimacy of her authority." (p. 18) This is a facade; the face is made clear on the train to New Orleans, for when Helene and Nel mistakenly enter a car of the train reserved for whites only, the conductor inquires, "What you think you doin' gal?" (p. 20) The word, "gal," reduces Helene to just another Negro woman, and she is at a loss for words as she struggles to regain her dignity. The entire trip South proves degrading for Helene. Once the train enters the deep South, she can only relieve herself of body-waste in an open field, because there simply are no restrooms for coloreds. This is especially traumatic for Helene, because her main goal in life has been to maintain her dignity at all times. It is precisely this element of respectability that Nel extracts and adopts from her mother's personality. It was Helene Wright who "drove her daugther's imagination underground." (p. 18)

On the other hand, Sula was influenced by her mother, Hannah, and by her grandmother, Eva, neither of whom ardently sought social respectability. Sula's mother and grandmother had shared the same rundown house since Hannah had returned to Eva's house after Sula's father died, when Sula was yet a child. It was in Eva's home that Sula grew up. The house was large, with a steady stream of boarders always coming and going. There was never a male figure permanently in this house, which could be the reason why "all the Peace women simply loved maleness for its own sake." (p. 41) Hannah "would fuck practically anything," and as Sula saw her mother "step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier," this "taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent." (pp. 43-44) "It was man love that Eva bequeathed to her daughters." (p. 41)
Nevertheless, from Eva Sula also learned to be tenacious and independent. It was rumored that Eva had been so resolute as to thrust one of her legs under a train to collect ten thousand dollars in insurance compensation in order to take care of her three children, for her husband, Boy-Boy, had deserted her. (p. 31) Eva was also tenacious enough to kill Plum, her only son--she burned him alive. Plum, a veteran of World War I, returned home psychologically scarred by that war. As a result of his mental agony, Plum became a drug addict. His desolate circumstances caused Eva much anguish. To mitigate her anguish and his, Eva kills Plum. She did not kill him out of cruelty, but out of a perverted kind of love. Eva was also persevering enough to do whatever was necessary for her survival and for the survival of her family. Eva's circumstances in life compelled her to adopt this value system. Concerning Eva's attitudinal influence on Sula, a critic observes: "Intemperate, restless, Sula had some of the arrogance of her one-legged grandmother Eva."9

In spite of the difference in upbringing, when Sula and Nel met for the first time, "they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because both had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something they could be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on." (p. 52) In spite of this friendship, each maintained her individuality. Nel remained sufficiently vulnerable for a conventional family life. Sula, on the other hand, was adamantly opposed to conventionality, even

to her death, but she was also implacably strong. She was strong enough to slash off "the tip of her finger." Later she was tough enough to watch her mother, Hannah, burn to death simply "because she was interested." (p. 78) Sula and Nel shared each other's lives in the Bottom until Nel's wedding night. Then Sula left the Bottom, and she would not return for ten tumultuous years. This ten-year hiatus is frequently noted in the criticism. For example, the Booklist (March 15, 1974) review notes:

Sula leaves town after Nel's marriage and on her return 10 years later becomes--through her amorality and distinct difference--the focal point for the neighborhood's animosity and the imagined source of everyone's personal misfortune until her death, alone and unattended, releases the neighborhood from its tension and forces Nel to realize that she had needed Sula more than she had needed the husband whom Sula had stolen and discarded.10

However, the critics do not see the ten-year hiatus as a novelistic defect.

Part Two of the novel begins with Sula's return to Medallion. The chapter that begins Part Two is entitled "1937." After traveling to many major cities in the United States and even attending college for a while, Sula comes home "accompanied by a plague of robins. The little yam-breasted, shuddering birds were everywhere," (p. 89) and this strange occurrence seems to be proof to the people of the Bottom that Sula is just as mysterious as ever. The mystery soon gave way to angry suspicion as the people of the Bottom manufactured stories of wickedness and attributed them to Sula. For example, a little boy named Teapot fell down Sula's steps and fractured his bones, and the

10 Booklist 70 (March 15, 1974): 774.
people of the Bottom believed the rumor that "Sula had pushed him." Then Mr. Findley choked on a chicken bone he was sucking; he died on the spot at the moment Sula looked up at him. The rumor attributed his death to Sula's witchcraft. These and other bits of evidence accumulated, and everybody in the Bottom ostracized Sula. Beyond the fact that the entire Bottom thought Sula to be a witch, they said she was "guilty of the unforgivable thing. They said Sula slept with white men." (p. 112) "They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable." (p. 113) In response to Sula's wickedness, several critics note that Sula "became a pariah within the community of the Bottom."¹¹ There are several generalizations about the meaning of the circumstances surrounding Sula's life. Jonathan Yardley offers an often articulated generalization. Yardley writes:

Thus, the novel is much more than a portrait of one woman. It is in a large measure an evocation of a way of life that existed in the black communities of the small towns of the '20's and '30's, a way of life compounded of such ingredients as desperation, neighborliness and persistence.¹²

This basic generalization is found in several reviews, including one in the New York Times Book Review (June 2, 1974): "She [Sula] is at once a repudiation of all the defenses it [the community of the Bottom] has erected against discrimination and suppression, and the embodiment of the anger it has submerged."¹³


¹²Ibid.

Sula's old friend Nel was the only person truly happy to see her upon her return to the Bottom. Excitedly, the two black women laughed and talked about childhood days. Nel had not laughed in many years. Then one day Nel returned home and found her old friend, Sula, and her husband, Jude, making love. Nel observed:

But they had been down on all fours, naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all fours like dogs. Nibbling at each other... (p. 105)

At this point, the friendship between the two black women came to an abrupt end. In addition, Nel's husband immediately abandoned her and the children.

It was three years before Nel and Sula came face to face again. Sula was now thirty years old and on her deathbed. Nel had known that Sula was sick and that nobody in the Bottom would visit her. After hesitating, Nel stopped by to visit Sula, but she also wanted to ask Sula why she had made love to her husband when they were such good friends. Nel asked the question that she had wanted to ask for three years. Nel said:

And you didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.

Sula responded:

What do you mean take him away? I didn't kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it? (p. 145)

Shortly after this exchange Sula died, without any apologies to Nel (or to anybody else) for anything she had been or for anything she had done.

In addition to the many critical analyses of the plot, primarily involving Sula and Nel, there is a long list of other elements and
aspects of the novel that the critics choose to discuss. The list include racism, friendship, setting, characterization, "authentic dialog," poetry, suffering, death, sex, Morrison's writing, Morrison's talent, Morrison's pessimistic worldview, symbols, love and *Sula* as feminist literature.

In the initial criticism of *The Bluest Eye*, the critics seemed somewhat uncertain and tentative about the quality of the novel and its central message. One might expect this attitude, since *The Bluest Eye* was a first novel and there was no other material upon which to make judgments. However, the initial criticism of *Sula* was more resolute in its proclamations. That is to say, the general tone of the criticism seems to say that *Sula* is an exceptional novel from a writer who has already proved that she can write novels with serious messages. Sara Blackburn's very early review of the novel in *The New York Times Book Review* (December 30, 1973) was representative of much of the early assessments of the novel and the novelist. Blackburn asserts that Morrison is "someone who really knows how to clank out a sentence . . . and her dialogue is so compressed and life-like that it sizzles."\textsuperscript{14} There were many other critics who were just as positive. Elliott Anderson, writing in the *Chicago Tribune Book World* (January 13, 1974), exclaims that the novel is "one of the most beautifully written, sustained works of fiction I had read in some time."\textsuperscript{15}

This is further echoed by Jonathan Yardley in the *Washington Post Book*.


World (February 3, 1974): "Sula is rich in mood and feeling, its humor is earthy and delightful, and its dialogue is especially sharp." Similarly, Ruth Rambo McClain, in Black World (June, 1947), discusses the "sophisticated symbols" in the novel and claims that it "command[s] at least a second reading." Then Douglas O'Connor in Black Creation (Annual 1974-75) says that Morrison uses "her playful intelligence to create the circumstances of this striking tale, Sula." Margo Jefferson in Ms (December 1974) adds that "Morrison has a musician's sense of tone, texture, and emotional balance" in Sula. And Barbara Smith is almost ecstatic in Freedomways (Vol. 14, 1974) when she says "Morrison is a virtuoso writer."

The assessment by the critics are important, in that they serve two major purposes. First, the very immediate critical responses are extremely important in that they can, and often do, determine whether a book, especially one by a relatively unknown writer, will get read by a larger general audience. Most often these early reviews are very short and are directed primarily toward those in the infrastructure of the book trading and distribution centers. To achieve their primary purpose, which is to sell books, the reviews need not be lengthy.

There are a number of publications which include very short reviews. Some of the publications are: New Republic (March 9, 1974), Newsweek (January 7, 1974 and December 30, 1974), Publishers Weekly (November 5, 1973 and August 4, 1975), Choice (March 1974), Library Journal (August 1973), Kirkus Reviews (November 1, 1973), Booklist (March 15, 1974) and New York Times Book Review (June 2, 1974 and December 1, 1974). Few of these reviews are longer than a paragraph. Therefore, the reviews do not provide detailed discussions; rather, they simply list some aspects of Sula. The upshot of these reviews is that Sula is an "impressive second novel," as Kirkus Reviews explains. Aspects such as originality, authenticity, poetry, and characterization are listed in both Library Journal and Publisher's Weekly; sex, friendship, poverty, human and symbolism are listed in Newsweek; language usage is listed in Newsweek and Choice; and narrative style is listed in both New Republic and New York Times Book Review. 20 Some of the short reviews are read by the general audience, especially those reviews in publications such as Newsweek and New York Times Book Review.

But there are more lengthy reviews, because the primary goal of criticism is to explain adequately to the novel's readers and potential readers how the novel helps to illuminate problems of the society and of the world. A major purpose of the novel itself is "to relate through the medium of individual adventures the movement of an entire society, of which it is itself only a detail, a significant point; for the totality which we call society, properly understood, 20See bibliography.
consists not only of men but of all sorts of material and cultural objects.\textsuperscript{21}

While much of the criticism explained positive attributes of the novel, there were a number of critics who agreed that \textit{Sula} was not without defects. In many instances, some of the same critics who praised the novel also noted flaws during the same analysis. However, there were a few critical reviews that had little or no positive statements about the novel. Even the titles of some of the critical reviews in this category hint of the tone and theme of the review. Articles with titles such as "Same Old Story," "Something Ominous Here," and "Underwritten and Overwritten" were negative and only pointed out blemishes. \textit{Sula} was issued in London by Allen Lane, and the article entitled "Same Old Story" appeared in the \textit{Times Literary Supplement} (October 4, 1974); here, the British audience was led to believe that the novel was really not worth reading. The brief review opened with a short summary of \textit{Sula} and ended with:

As a record of a vanished life this is convincing and vivid; it is only the story of Sula herself which is unsuccessful. She is left on the level of allegory in her growing up, her effect on the village and particularly at her death, which seems contrived to coincide with the drying up of the themes she represents.\textsuperscript{22}

The unnamed reviewer was incorrect in writing about \textit{Sula} as "Toni

\textsuperscript{22}Times Literary Supplement (October 4, 1974): 1062.
Morrison's first novel."\(^{23}\) While this lack of knowledge does not render the reviewer's assertions invalid, it certainly makes them questionable. By suggesting that the story of Sula is "unsuccessful," the reviewer tacitly admits a void in his understanding of the pathos inherent in Afro-American culture.

Just as the criticism reveals the cultural biases of some individual critics, the periodicals in which the criticism appears also have manifested worldviews that they promote. Most often the critic's worldview and the publication he writes for are strikingly similar. For example, there are also some publications rooted in Euro-American cultural tradition that share the reviewer's opinion emanating from London. There is an assessment in the *Village Voice* (March 7, 1974) that speaks of *Sula* as allegory. The reviewer says, "In the end, allegory overtakes the novel, and the mythically large characters, so magnificently drawn, have their reality subjugated to their meaning."\(^{24}\) Likewise, Sara Blackburn in *The New York Times Book Review* (December 30, 1973) admitted that "It's possible, I guess, to talk about *Sula* as allegory."\(^{25}\) And Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in the *New York Times* (January 7, 1974) said that he had "glimpses" of what Morrison was "trying to do in her second novel, *Sula,*" but that he was never really able to fully understand her themes. Lehmann-Haupt concludes that "What Miss Morrison had in mind in writing *Sula*

\(^{23}\)Ibid.


\(^{25}\)Sara Blackburn, p. 3.
finally remains unarticulated." Only Lehmann-Haupt gives such an obtuse assessment of *Sula*. This assessment indicates a fundamental lack of understanding of the themes Morrison presents. The lack of understanding is probably due to the cultural gap between the critic and the novelist, in which the critic has not expended the intellectual effort necessary to begin to bridge the gap. All of these reviewers brought their Euro-American cultural background to the reading of the novel. The audience they are speaking to through these publications shares their cultural backgrounds and experiences. Moreover, the publications promote Euro-American ideals. As is true of most critics, the reviewers are giving what they feel are honest assessments, but there are cultural prohibitives that will not allow the reviewers to relate unconstrainedly to the experiences of the people of Morrison's Bottom. For example, Sara Blackburn is really talking about the limitations of cultural experiences--her cultural experiences--when she talks about the "narrowness" of the novel and "its refusal to brim over into the world outside of its provincial setting." However, there appears to be a significant difference between the Euro-American assessment of the novel and the European assessment. The European's assessment seems to all but dismiss the novel. On the other hand, the Euro-American critics seem to recognize some of the values in the book, but not without pointing toward imperfections as well.

There were also some critics who felt that Morrison's worldview,

26Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, p. 29.

27Blackburn.
as evidenced in *Sula*, was too pessimistic. In essence, this category of critics felt that Morrison created a world devoid of all hope for her characters. As a result, Sara Blackburn asserts that in *Sula* the doomed characters are "locked in a world where hope for the future is a foreign commodity."28 Also, Jerry H. Bryant, writing in *The Nation* (July 6, 1974), observed that there is something very different about *Sula*, different in that there was no other Afro-American writer to create such a bleak world. Bryant calls this difference "ominous." In this article, Bryant explains that "Sula, Ms. Morrison's protagonist, has qualities I have seen in a fictional black female only recently." He goes on to say that this different quality amounts to a "fierceness bordering on the demonic," and Bryant concludes that Morrison has "a fascination with evil" and "an interest in the lower layers of the psyche of black characters, in their capacity to hurt and destroy."29 While some critics do not agree with Morrison's worldview, other critics seem to say that in *Sula* she has created a new level of awareness. Cynthia J. Smith, writing in *Cross Currents* (Fall 1976), seems to say this when she writes that "Sula is no stereotype. She lives a life that is different."30 There were other critics who noted other differences: Douglas O'Connor said that the world Morrison created "is bordered by a vision of hell,"31 and

28Ibid.


31Douglas O'Connor.
Barbara Smith said "Sula is frightening," while Patricia Meyer Spacks stated that Sula's "most original aspect is its treatment of the bizarre." 32

The critics were nearly unanimous in saying that Morrison's skill in using the language is masterful. The critics spoke to this matter in no uncertain terms. Margo Jefferson's article in Ms (December 1974) is representative. She writes: "The language is passionate and precise; lyrical and philosophical." 33 One barometer of excellent writing skills is probably the ability to say much in as few words as possible. Sula is a very short novel, but Newsweek (January 7, 1974) reported to its readers that the novel's "brevity [is] belied by its surprising scope and depth." 34 Sara Blackburn summed it up by writing that "the dialogue sizzles."

Morrison used her vibrant dialog to bring her characters alive. Much of the criticism focuses on character development, especially as regards the heroine Sula. The attention that the critics give to characters in their reviews is necessary because it is almost impossible to talk about meaning in fiction without discussing characters and plot. Sula is the most fully developed character (also the most important character), and the critics discuss her in greatest detail. However, Jonathan Yardley states that "the most fully realized character in the novel is the community of the Bottom." 35

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33 Margo Jefferson.
34 Newsweek (January 7, 1974): 63
35 Jonathan Yardley.
The setting of the novel is the Bottom, and the Bottom is often discussed in the criticism. There is no doubt that Morrison wants to draw attention to the setting of the book. The novel opens with a three-and-one-half-page prologue that describes and explains the irony of the name--the Bottom. The Bottom is actually a hill. The novel opens thus:

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom.

The novel reveals that all of Morrison's characters are inextricably connected to the Bottom. Therefore, many of the other critics agreed with Jonathan Yardley and found it necessary to discuss "the community in Ohio." The Bottom is a part of the meaning and message of *Sula*.

Also contained in the criticism is the position that *Sula* belongs in the sphere of feminist literature. Barbara Smith, writing in *Freedomways* (vol. 14, no. 1, 1974), is explicit on this point: "As significant as her [Morrison's] rootedness in Black life, is the fact that her perspective is undeniably feminine." Barbara Smith admits as evidence the fact that *Sula* is basically about the "relationship between young Black girls." Indeed, one aspect of feminist literature is that it addresses problems and relationships between and among women. Barbara Smith feels that *Sula* is successful in addressing the relationship between these Black girls because

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36 Barbara Smith, *Freedomways*. 

Morrison understands "The link between Black women." Cynthia J. Smith extends the analysis further by saying that the novel also explores the relationship between black women and their families and between them and their community.

In their discussions of *Sula*, many of the critics provide, without exception, allusions to *The Bluest Eye*. Some critics even pause to give a brief summary of *The Bluest Eye* in their discussion of *Sula*, clearly either to remind or to inform their readers. However, with the exception of that of Sara Blackburn, the criticism during this period does not include statements about *The Bluest Eye* that differ significantly from the criticism before 1973. Blackburn states that *The Bluest Eye* probably did not deserve the praise it received. Blackburn writes that the novel probably attracted more attention than it otherwise might have in the publishing industry and was received rather uncritically by readers and viewers: socially conscious readers--including myself--were so pleased to see a new writer of Morrison's obvious talent that we tended to celebrate the book and ignore its flaws.

Generally, the critics essentially restate that *The Bluest Eye* is a novel in which the language is captivating while the narrative illuminates the devastation caused by racism.

In sum, critical reviews of *Sula* between 1974 and 1977 are sparse, and the reviews are generally too short to provide adequate analysis of the novel. This fact necessarily lends itself to generalizations about the book. However, the critics isolate all the

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37 Ibid.

38 Sara Blackburn.
major and minor themes in *Sula*. The major themes concern the human devastation that racism causes and feminine human bonding. Moreover, the critics' assertions of what *Sula* means can be placed into what can be called three separate schools of criticism. The schools can be labeled as Euro-American, Afro-American and feminist. Each school makes interpretations based on cultural assumptions. However, there is much overlapping between the schools.
CHAPTER III

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1978 TO 1981

This chapter will examine criticism of Toni Morrison's novels between 1978 and 1981. Most of the criticism during this period is about *Song of Solomon*. *Song of Solomon* is Toni Morrison's third novel, and after its publication in 1977 there was a considerable amount of criticism to follow. Much of the early critical responses to *Song of Solomon* appear in publications that target general readers, and most of these early critical responses are short book reviews or short articles. Also, some early critical responses appear in publications that target the more sophisticated and scholarly readers. However, from late 1978 on, much of the critical reactions to *Song of Solomon* appear in publications that target scholars. The net effect was that Morrison's third novel was recommended, read, and analyzed by both general audiences and scholars. The prior two Morrison novels did not receive similar penetrating examination immediately after their publication. In addition to focusing on the criticism of *Song of Solomon*, this chapter will also examine the critical responses to both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* in the years following 1977. During this period, the critical responses to Morrison's first two novels appear almost exclusively in academic and scholarly journals. Moreover, in the wake of *Song of Solomon*, these later responses to the earlier
novels tend to indicate that they are more profound than some of the earlier criticism had indicated.

The volume of criticism generated on Song of Solomon was higher than on the first two books. This is due in part to the fact that by this time both more general readers and more critics were interested in Morrison's work. Many of the interested critics had highly recommended Morrison's first two novels. In Song of Solomon (as well as in The Bluest Eye and Song of Solomon) many critics proclaimed that Morrison had given readers two reasons to read her novel. The book gives both pleasure and understanding. The critics and a body of general readers had come to expect quality writing from Morrison. Therefore, the initial reviews recognized both the past successes of the author as well as the merits of Song of Solomon itself. With the higher volume of critical responses in a wider variety of publications also came a wider readership. With Song of Solomon, Morrison's audience grew. One can point to the larger number of books sold as evidence of a larger audience.

In some respects, the reception of Song of Solomon was like the reception of The Bluest Eye and Sula. First, the critical reactions to the novel were mixed. The critics praised the novel, but also pointed toward blemishes. Secondly, the critical appraisals as well as the publications they appeared in reflected cultural biases. Finally, much of the criticism analyzed traditional literary elements and techniques.

Nevertheless, there were two striking differences between the reception of Song of Solomon and the reception of the two earlier novels. There was a cadre of critics who attacked Morrison
vociferously. There were more critics to respond to *Song of Solomon*, but there were also more critics who saw this novel in a totally negative light. Some of the critics in this category were Afro-American. Secondly, *Song of Solomon* established Toni Morrison as an American writer. This is partly the cause and partly the effect of the number of critical responses, the large Euro-American and Afro-American readerships, and the scholarly focus.

When *Song of Solomon* was published in 1977, Toni Morrison's name was well-known neither in literary circles nor among general readers. However, Morrison's first two novels had gained her respect as a writer, and her name was at least recognizable to many. It was *Song of Solomon* that established Morrison as an American writer who would probably stay on the literary scene for some time. While *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* were good novels, and were recognized as such, critics did not appear to be absolutely convinced that Morrison could ever stake any claim to literary greatness with them. The fact that after the publication of *Song of Solomon* both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* were perceived as better novels is probably due in part to the quality of *Song of Solomon*. Compared to *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* is a very lengthy novel. Some critics even described it as an "epic." For example, Charles De Arman, writing in *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review* (vol. 6, 1980), sees Milkman as the "archetypal hero." That is, Milkman shares some of the heroic qualities of a hero such as Odysseus in Homer's *Odyssey*. In De Arman's article called "Milkman as the Archetypal Hero," he makes this analogy:

Not only do Macon Dead, Jr.'s movements trace a course that parallels that of the protagonist of romance, but when seen in the light of the quest, his trek takes on the wider significance
of the archetypal hero, of one whose roles it is to restore the runes of wisdom.

It is precisely the quest theme in Song of Solomon that many critics point to as the significant difference between this book and The Bluest Eye and Sula.

Song of Solomon is divided into two parts. The setting for Part One is Michigan. (This is the third time Morrison chose to write about her native midwest.) In Part Two, Macon "Milkman" Dead, the protagonist, travels eastward to Pennsylvania and Virginia. It is in these eastern locales that much of the action takes place in Part Two.

This "epic" is basically about Milkman Dead's quest to find his identity, or even his roots. This quest is what takes Milkman from Michigan to Pennsylvania and Virginia. In classical style, Morrison uses Part One of Song of Solomon both for her basic exposition and to set up the central conflict. Part Two is thus devoted to the resolution of the conflict.

In Song of Solomon, and most similar novels, the quest then is intricately connected to the sequence of events. Therefore, virtually all of the critics attempted to interpret the happenings of the novel. Commenting on this necessity, a critic writes in Spectator (December 9, 1978) that "the whole thing is rooted in strong, detailed reality: the cross-purpose, cross-grained, off-center life of the northern urban blacks." The events in Song of Solomon are told in the typical Morrisonian fashion. There is a series of vignettes. The

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2Spectator 241 (December 9, 1978): 41.
opening vignette is about Robert Smith's leaping from the roof of Mercy Hospital with "wide blue silk wings." Then Morrison appears to be meandering, as there is a digression to give some background information about the midwestern town Robert Smith lives in. Morrison also gives information about other people in the town. For example, Morrison digresses to explain why the blacks, who basically live on the Southside of this town, refused to call the hospital Mercy Hospital, but instead called it No Mercy Hospital (because the whites would not allow blacks to be treated there). However, the reader soon learns the purpose of this apparent meandering. An example of this success is evident by the way Morrison very subtly introduces all of the principal characters without the readers even realizing (until later) that these people are the focus of the "epic."

As Mr. Robert Smith stands on the roof of No Mercy Hospital about to jump, a crowd of people who are curious gathers on the street below as onlookers. One of the onlookers below is the "pregnant dead doctor's daughter." This is the casual introduction that Ruth Foster Dead receives. However, Ruth is the mother of the protagonist, Milkman Dead. As such, Ruth becomes a principal character herself, so Morrison's writing is manifestly not digressive, but purposeful. Also, among the crowd below Mr. Smith are Ruth's "half-grown daughters." These are Milkman's two sisters, Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians. They too are important characters. In the crowd also is the "poorly dressed singer"; this is Milkman's Aunt Pilate, also a major character. Lastly, the child that the "pregnant dead doctor's daughter" is carrying is Macon Dead, III himself, who later comes to be known as Milkman. The entire Dead family is there,
except the elder Macon Dead, Milkman's father, as Mr. Smith, an insurance agent, jumps to his death.

The elder Macon Dead, Milkman's father, was proud, middle-class, and one of the most affluent black men in the entire town. At twenty-five, Macon "was already a colored man of property." Macon had dedicated his entire life to the pursuit of property and material wealth. Now, in his later years, he owns many houses from which he collects rent. Macon is also callous. When Mrs. Bains, a tenant, fails to pay her rent, she begs Macon for an extension, as well as entreats him not to put her and her babies out of doors. Macon asks Mrs. Bains: "Can they [the babies] make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That's where they gonna be if you don't figure out some way to get me my money." (p. 21) Macon was just as insensitive and demanding with his family and in his private matters as he was with his tenants and other business matters:

Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been their girlish voices. (p. 10)

Neither had Macon's wife, Ruth Foster Dead, achieved full personhood. Ruth was the daughter of Dr. Foster, who at one time was the only black doctor in town and, as such, "the most important Negro in the city." Back when he was still a young man and considering taking a wife, Macon felt that his rental property had gained him enough

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3Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon (New York: New American Library, 1978), 23. All further page references to this work will be noted in the text.
respect to approach the well-respected Dr. Foster to ask for the hand of Miss Foster in marriage. Ruth and Macon were married and begot three children—two girls and Milkman. Macon Dead, III acquired the name Milkman as a result of being discovered at the age of four still getting "sweet milk" from his mother's flesh. This was a "pleasure" Ruth "hated to give up." In addition to this unnatural attachment to her son, Ruth had an unnatural relationship with her father, Dr. Foster. Afraid of her husband and withdrawn from the world, Ruth lost much of her humanness.

While there was no love in the home of Ruth and Macon Dead, the house had all the material comforts. It was in this environment that Milkman grew up. There was no struggle, no want, and no responsibility.

There was an uncanny attraction between Milkman and Guitar Bains. They were friends. This friendship extended unbroken into adulthood. However, Guitar was a "Southside nigger." That is, he lived on the Southside of town, which was the section in which poor blacks lived and the section in which Macon rented houses. In fact, the Mrs. Bains whom Macon threatened to put out of doors was Guitar's mother. Yet Milkman and Guitar were the best of friends.

When Milkman was twelve and Guitar somewhat older, the two boys went to visit Pilate. Pilate was Milkman's paternal aunt and Macon Dead's only sister. Pilate lived in a rundown shack on the outskirts of the midwestern town. She made and sold wine illegally for a living. Pilate remained the complete opposite of what her brother Macon aspired to. Pilate did not share her brother's middle-class values. Therefore, Macon had forbidden his son to visit his sister. However,
Milkman visited her out of curiosity, for it was rumored that Pilate had been born without a navel and the two boys went to ask her if indeed the gossip were true.

It was on this initial visit that Milkman saw and met Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter and Milkman's cousin. Hagar was "as pretty a girl as he'd ever seen," so Milkman fell in love with his cousin and often returned to the forbidden house where he felt "completely happy." This relationship grew, or rather lingered on, for several years.

When Macon found out that his son had defied him and was regularly "drinking in the wine house" he was angry. Macon reaffirmed to Milkman that Pilate was "no good," and, harshly, again forbade his son to visit his aunt and said that it was time Milkman "started learning how to work," but did not know that Milkman had fallen in love. For Milkman, it was no longer a decision as to whether he should go to "the wine house" or remain away. Milkman was ruled by his emotions, and therefore he returned to the forbidden house many times.

During these many visits, Pilate began to tell Milkman about her girlhood days when she and the now middle-class Macon were not only sister and brother, but also friends. Pilate also told about her father and how he had been shot and killed. Milkman began to learn about his ancestry. He also began to work with his father and continued to live a relatively uneventful life with no real responsibility. Consequently, Milkman was well into his thirties, but still immature.

Nevertheless, there were a few occasions in which Milkman was
temporarily jolted out of his complacency. For example, there was a physical confrontation with his father. Next, Milkman got some disturbing information concerning his mother. Macon related the story to his son of the day when his father-in-law died. In this section of the novel, Morrison introduces the concept of necrophilia. This concept, originated in the Greco-Roman world, has been successfully employed in American letters by others. Specifically, William Faulkner employs the concept in "A Rose for Emily." Macon had been living in the house with the doctor and his daughter when his father-in-law died. When Macon got the news one day that Dr. Foster was dead, he returned to the house to find his wife in bed with the dead man. Macon tells his son the story:

In the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth. (p. 73)

Later, Milkman finds out about his mother's midnight trips to the cemetery to visit with her dead father. Then, while walking down the street one day, Milkman remembered and thought to himself:

My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up and wear knickers, and somebody saw it and laughed and--and that is why they called me Milkman and that is why my father never does and that is why my mother never does, but everybody else does. And how did I forget that? And why? And if she did that to me when there was no reason for it, when I also drank milk and Ovaltine and everything else from a glass, then maybe she did other things with her father? (p. 78)

Milkman found these revelations perplexing for a while, but he remained irresponsible. Basically, Milkman lacked experience. "All he knew in the world about the world was what other people had told him." (p. 120)

Milkman's insensitivity can be seen through his relationship with Hagar. "After more than a dozen years," Milkman had grown tired of the
relationship and decided to end the liaison. Hagar was still in love with Milkman, and when she got his note announcing that her cousin wanted to end the relationship, she went mad. Milkman ended the relationship, and Hagar died of a broken heart.

Milkman also teamed with his friend, Guitar, to steal from his Aunt Pilate. Milkman thought that Pilate kept a bag of gold in her house. The two young men stole the bag, but to their surprise it contained only human bones. The bones were the remains of what Pilate thought was a white man whom Macon had killed in Pennsylvania many, many years before. At the time of the killing, the white man had in his possession a sack of gold, and Macon thought Pilate had kept the gold all these years. Since Pilate did not have it, Macon reasoned that the gold must still be in Pennsylvania, deep in the woods, in the mouth of a cave. So Milkman decided to go and find it.

In Part Two of Song of Solomon, Milkman leaves the midwestern city in search of a bag of gold. The protagonist goes in search of gold, but he finds something more valuable--himself. For more than thirty years, Milkman had been shallow and irresponsible. In effect, he did not know who he was. Milkman explains to Guitar his inner confusion:

Daddy wants me to be like him and hate my mother. My mother wants me to think like her and hate my father. Corinthians won't speak to me; Lena wants me out... Everybody wants something from me, you know what I mean? (pp. 223-24)

In search of the gold, Milkman took a plane as far as Pittsburgh and a Greyhound bus on to Danvill, Pennsylvania, and from Danville to the mouth of the cave where his father and Pilate had parted many years before while they were yet children. After Macon had killed the
white man, Pilate had dashed into the cave and refused to come out. Macon had been forced to leave Pilate. When they saw each other again, they were well into old age. When Milkman got to the cave, he found that "There were no fat little pigeon-breasted bags of gold. There was nothing." (p. 255) So Milkman went back to Danville. In and near Danville, Macon met people like Reverend Cooper and Circe, who had known his father and his aunt when they were children. Milkman quickly learned that the people of Danville had held both his father and his aunt in high regard. In fact, Macon and Pilate had been well respected. More importantly, Milkman found out that his paternal grandfather had been a man of means and well known for his high moral character. This was especially surprising to Milkman because he had never respected his father, his mother, his aunt or his sisters, but, through the eyes of the people who had known Macon and Pilate in their childhood, Milkman began to love and respect his family.

With this profound revelation, Milkman decided that he wanted to know more about his heritage, so he set out from Danville to Shalimar, Virginia. Shalimar, Virginia was where his paternal grandfather had, in part, grown up before coming to Pennsylvania.

Once in Shalimar, Milkman found that the people at first resented him and his citified dress and citified attitude. "He had done nothing to deserve their contempt," (p. 279) but they were hostile toward him anyway. In spite of their treatment of himself, Milkman had an "interest in his own people," and he wanted to know "who they were, and what they were like." (pp. 296-97) Through the elderly Susan Byrd, Milkman was able to become acquainted with the flattering
stories about many of his ancestors. Specifically, Milkman learned that his great-grandfather, Jake, had been the son of Solomon, the flying African. The legend was that Solomon had left America and flown back to Africa. Finally, Milkman comes to appreciate his heritage and himself. Thus, the novel ends with Milkman's asserting himself as a responsible person.

In addition to the often discussed major theme of the quest for identity, the critics respond to an array of other themes and aspects of Song of Solomon. Some of the subjects that appear most frequently in the criticism are: racism, mythology, black consciousness, Morrison's command of the language, Morrison's storytelling skills, characterization, Morrison's artistic vision, incestuous relationships, odd character-names, and Morrison's style.

Shortly after Song of Solomon was published, some of the earliest reviews appeared in book-trade publications. Some of these publications were Kirkus Reviews (July 1, 1977), Publisher's Weekly (June 27, 1977), Booklist (July 15, 1977), and Library (September 1, 1977). The target audiences of these publications consist basically of booksellers and publishers. This group of book dealers has a keen interest in the commercial potential of books. Therefore, Song of Solomon was first viewed as a potential commercial success. Generally, these publishers' reviews of Song of Solomon are only a few very short paragraphs, or even a few sentences, in length, and unsigned. For example, the review of Song of Solomon in Booklist (July 15, 1977) is only a two-sentence paragraph. Most of the reviews that appear in this publication are short. Yet, they achieve their purposes. That is, the reviews communicate only the essential
information necessary to make decisions regarding the commercialization of books. The review simply says:

Morrison, author of The Bluest Eye, unravels the mysterious chain of being in a black American family in this book of genealogical revelations. Powerful confrontations dominate the action, as a young son leaves his northern home on a quest for personal freedom that unexpectedly divulges the emotional riches of his roots.\textsuperscript{4}

The essential message is that this is a classical quest story that people will enjoy reading. Therefore, the book could become a best-seller. And indeed it did. A review in Publisher's Weekly (June 27, 1977) compares Song of Solomon to Alex Haley's Roots. The review in Kirkus Reviews (July 1, 1977) also compares Song of Solomon to Roots. Publisher's Weekly also indicated that Song of Solomon was Book-of-the-Month Club selection. The comparison to Roots perhaps was meant to suggest that Song of Solomon would sell as well as Roots sold. Indeed, the mere fact that it is a Book-of-the-Month Club selection meant that many copies would be sold. In Library Journal (September 1, 1977), Morrison is placed in "the folklore tradition" of Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison. This means that all libraries must purchase a few copies. In essence, these trade publications link Song of Solomon with other books, authors, and ideas that have already produced commercial successes.

That one of the primary aims of these early reviews was to sell the novel does not mean that they contained inaccurate information. In fact, many of the later reviews stressed some of the same ideas. Nonetheless, Song of Solomon did sell well enough to give Toni

\textsuperscript{4}Booklist (July 15, 1977): 1704.
Morrison some financial security. Moreover, the novel obtained a very large audience.

Many of the early reviews appear in publications that target a vast number of Euro-American readers. Moreover, these same publications are extremely influential in that they help to shape public opinion. Reviews of Morrison's prior two novels do not appear in as many of these influential publications as reviews of Song of Solomon do. It may be that these publications, with their authoritative voices, contributed to the financial success of Song of Solomon. Also, in contrast to the reviews of The Bluest Eye and Sula in some of the publications, the reviews of Song of Solomon discuss in greater detail the elements of the novel. This is rendered evident by the length of the reviews and by the variety of elements discussed. They are notably unlike the reviews of the prior novels which, simply listed the elements of the novels. For example, reviews in New York Review of Books (November 10, 1977), Washington Post Book World (September 4, 1977), and Newsweek magazine (September 14, 1977) are more detailed, in comparison to reviews of The Bluest Eye and Sula in similar publications. These reviews discuss elements of Song of Solomon such as setting, characterization, language, plot, subplot, and theme. Unlike reviews of the prior two novels, these elements are discussed, rather than simply listed as interesting aspects of the novel. Other publications that discussed these elements include New York Times, New York Times Book Review, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune Book World, Christian Science Monitor, and Village Voice.

Since many of the publications that published reviews of Song of Solomon were targeted for Euro-American audiences, one might assume
that Euro-Americans were to a large degree responsible for the financial success of *Song of Solomon*. In addition, many of the analyses and critiques of *Song of Solomon* demonstrably originated in Euro-Americans' minds, with all their cultural biases, and were presented in publications that promote Euro-American cultural biases and assumptions.

*Song of Solomon* was also reviewed in publications which are controlled by Afro-Americans and promote Afro-American cultural biases and assumptions. Some publications in this category are *Essence* (January 1978), *Encore American and Worldwide News* (March 1978), *Black Book Bulletin* (March 1978), *Freedomways* (Second Quarter 1978), *Obsidian: Black Literature in Review* (vol. 6, 1980), *College Language Association Journal* (March 1981), *Umoja: A Scholarly Journal of Black Studies* (Fall 1978) and *The Crisis* (March 1978). The reviews in these and similar publications tend to include most of the elements which are discussed in the Euro-American controlled publications also include and emphasize additional elements in *Song of Solomon*. A review in the *College Language Association Journal* discusses the "intricate family relationship," "folklore," "pain in the tale," and "a fulfillment of expectations." Also, an article in the *Black Scholar* discusses "strength of character," while analyzing Morrison's characters. Other reviews include elements such as wit, humor, pain, black awareness, oral history, nature's relationship to the community, and the eternal rightness of things. This difference in emphasis can be attributed to the difference in the critic's and the publication's cultural awareness. Also, the list of elements may suggest a different level of understanding of the pathos in the novel. However, there are
some Afro-American critics who do not agree with Morrison's portrayal of Afro-American life, nor do some agree with Morrison's worldview. Similarly, some Euro-American critics, writing in Euro-American controlled publications, indicate some awareness of the pathos in Song of Solomon.

Another category of publication in which reviews and articles on Song of Solomon appeared were publications which targeted scholars. Some of these publications are Journal of Ethnic Studies, Minority Voices, Melus, Cross Currents, College Language Association Journal, Hudson Review, Yale Review, Black Scholar, and Freedomways. Also included in this category of scholarly materials are dissertations and books. In these publications many of the themes already identified are discussed.

In much of the critical responses to Song of Solomon which appeared in popular publications the critics spoke approvingly of Morrison's third novel. Nonetheless, some critics were quick to point out that Song of Solomon was not without flaws. In other words, the reviews were mixed, but were skewed toward the positive. For example, a review in the Village Voice (August 29, 1977) by Vivian Gormick is typical of reviews that generally saw the novel as a triumph, yet pointed out some of its shortcomings. First, Gormick tells her Euro-American, upwardly mobile readers about the theme of the novel. Gormick says that Song of Solomon is about "people who grow up in an emotional vacuum, disconnected, cut off from the immediacy of their lives." Gormick goes on to explain that Morrison used "mythology" to examine the lives of the people in Song of Solomon. The readers were further informed that even after Milkman became an adult there was an
"emotional emptiness at the heart of his existence" and that it was this "emotional emptiness" that would not allow his "genuine maturity." However, at last Milkman set out for "self-discovery." Gormick goes on to tell her readers that "Morrison is an extra­ordinarily good writer," yet she criticizes Morrison for "manipulativeness in the book's structure." She ends the review by saying that Morrison has a "misdirected angle of vision," but that despite these shortcomings, Song of Solomon "yield up moments of rich life." 5

Gormick's review, like many other reviews of Song of Solomon, did not emphasize the point that Morrison's third novel focuses on an Afro-American family. In essence, some of the reviewers seem to say that Song of Solomon is an excellent novel, but not because of what it says about Afro-American life. Rather, it is an excellent novel because of other reasons. Two of those reasons are the fact that Morrison's use of the language is fascinating and that the novel makes statements about American values and about positive human values.

On the other hand, many of the Afro-American reviewers began by noting the focus on Afro-American life and then generalizing about other messages in the novel. For example, Nikki Giovanni's review of Song of Solomon in Encore American and Worldwide News (November 7, 1977) examines the novel for its depiction of black life in America. Giovanni says:

Song of Solomon is ultimately a novel of Black men. They are pitiful, Morrison's Blacks, and we know them all. They sit

in the barber shops, at the gin mills, on the corners and stoops of their own lives.6

Another mixed review is a review in the Chicago Tribune Bookworld (September 11, 1977) by Maria K. Mootry. Mootry tells her readers that Song of Solomon speaks to the "need to transcend the bitter legacy of American racism." The implication is that anybody who does transcend American racism will be able to lead a better life. This conviction provides motivation for one to read the novel. Mootry also notices that Song of Solomon is a "shift from the woman-centered themes" of Morrison's prior two novels. This reviewer also points out flaws in the novel. She sees Morrison's message as "unnecessarily harsh" and the plot as a "bramblebush plot." However, she concludes that the book still "blossoms into a rose." The reason she gives for the novel's rising above its flaws is, ultimately Morrison's "tremendous perception and profound intelligence."7

In Charles R. Larson's review in the Washington Post Book World (September 4, 1977), he praises Song of Solomon as the "most substantial piece of fiction since Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man." Larson added that Song of Solomon placed Morrison "in the first rank of contemporary American writers." The reviewer acknowledges that Song of Solomon is about the "black heritage," but the book "says something about life for all of us." Larson implies to his readers that the focus on black life is less important than the classical


quest theme. Larson concludes that this is "a novel that will endure." There is another review of *Song of Solomon* in the December 11, 1977 issue of the *Washington Post Book World* in which the conclusion is that in the novel Morrison's "style effectively combines simplicity with a special tough beauty." This review is unsigned.

Jessica Harris, writing in *Essence* (September 1977) sees *Song of Solomon* as "vaster in terms of time, locales and sustained character development." Harris seems to be saying that *Song of Solomon* is evidence of Morrison's growth in mastering the craftsmanship of novel writing. However, Harris hints that Morrison has yet to develop satisfactorily as a novelist. She observes that Morrison is talented, but she also tells her readers of the "promise of what that talent will become." Harris, who also reviewed *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* for *Essence*, was less enthusiastic about *Song of Solomon*. *Essence*'s targeted readers are black women. As Mootry points out in the *Chicago Tribune Book World* (September 11, 1977), *Song of Solomon* is not a "woman-centered" novel, as the two previous novels are. One can conclude that *Essence* and its readers are interested in black feminist issues. Harris does note, however, that Morrison is a "master storyteller." She concludes that the novel is flawed, but she does not explain how it is flawed. Nonetheless, she says that the book deserves to be read.

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10Jessica Harris, *Essence* 8 (September 1977): 41.
Other critical responses included Nikki Giovanni, in *Encore* (November 7, 1977), who called *Song of Solomon* a "profound" novel which is a necessary addition to American letters. Then there is Margo Jefferson's review in *Newsweek* (September 12, 1977). Jefferson's review is entitled "Black Gold," and she compared *Song of Solomon* to a beautifully-patterned quilt in which all the designs fit together perfectly. There is another review published on September 12, 1977 in *Time* magazine. In *Time*, Angela Wigans says that Morrison's vision "encompasses both a private and a national heritage." Soon, in the September 17, 1977 edition of *Saturday Review*, Linda Kuehl notes that *Song of Solomon* gives "eloquence to black English." Reynolds Price probably pays Morrison a paramount compliment when he writes in *The New York Times Book Review* (September 11, 1977) that *Song of Solomon* is "about the possibility of transcendence within human life, on the time scale of a single lifetime." Then Price adds that "few Americans know, and can say, more than she ([Morrison] in the wise and spacious novel." 

There are other reviews that are basically positive, but warn the readers of the very painful emotions that *Song of Solomon* evokes. That

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11Nikki Giovanni.


is to say, Song of Solomon causes some Euro-American readers to feel guilty. Two such reviews appear in the Christian Science Monitor (October 20, 1977 and November 13, 1978). The reviewer asserts that Song of Solomon is a "black novel" and that "it is not light reading; it can hurt." Neil Millar, the reviewer, speaking to a very conservative audience through the Christian Science Monitor, realized that witnessing vicariously the pain and suffering of blacks in America causes some guilt for some Euro-Americans. Anne Tyler expresses the same discomfiture in The Washington Post Book World (December 4, 1977) when she says that after reading Song of Solomon the suffering characters are "still haunting my house. I suspect they'll be with me forever."17

There were some critics who felt quite uneasy by Morrison's worldview in Song of Solomon. Harold Beaver's review in the British publication, Times Literary Supplement (November 24, 1978), totally dismissed the novel by saying "the effect is freakish, full of verbal gestures and fabricated horrors."18

On January 20, 1978, Toni Morrison accepted the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction (Encore, February 6, 1978). From among two hundred critics and review editors, Song of Solomon was selected as the best work of fiction for 1977. The selection of

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Horrison's book was probably the clearest statement that the book was an artistic success. These awards are said to be political. Therefore, Horrison's selection by "a close vote" probably demonstrates the political nature of what is sometimes called artistic achievement. The prestigious award helped to enhance Horrison's career.

After the earlier critical reactions of 1977 and early 1978, critical articles on Song of Solomon began to appear that emphasize some of the same themes mentioned in the earlier reviews, but in a more scholarly and in a more detailed manner. Also, some of the later scholarly articles offer more scathing criticism of Horrison. Some of the negative criticism comes from Afro-American critics and is published in periodicals that target Afro-American scholarly readers. These Afro-American critics seem to think that Horrison had departed from the Afro-American tradition in fiction and had actually misrepresented black life.

For example, Norma Rodgers published an article in Freedomways (Second Quarter 1978) entitled "A Mockery of Afro-American Life." In that article, the only praiseworthy aspects of Song of Solomon Rodgers recognizes are Horrison's innovative "use of the language" and her effective, "uncommon style of writing." Then Rodgers opens a vicious attack on Horrison. She questions "the author's seriousness." In addition, she asserts that "Passages insult . . . the dignity of black womanhood" because the novel depicts them as "mentally disturbed people." According to Rodgers, Song of Solomon does not "advance the level of consciousness among the readership by creating a work of art based on human experience." Rodgers concludes by saying that Song of
Solomon portrays the experience of Afro-Americans "mindlessly" and that the novel "denigrates life." 19

Like Rodgers, Arthur P. Davis feels that Morrison misrepresents black life in *Song of Solomon*. Writing in the *College Language Association Journal* (June 1978), Davis says that *Song of Solomon* is a "strange novel." Davis goes on to say that the black people in the novel "are an 'alien' people to me, with actions that are unreal." The unreality is owing to the fact that the novel "lacks a certain depth of insight into human action." However, Davis agrees with Rodgers that the "novel is brilliantly written." 20

James McLaren, in *Cross Currents* (Fall 1978), also notes the absence of hope in *Song of Solomon*. Writing about the characters, McLaren points out that "the predominant quality of their lives often appears marked by hopelessness and the pursuit of temporary gratification." 21

On the other hand, many Afro-American critics, also writing in scholarly publications, are totally positive in their critical reactions. For example, Claudia C. Tate and Jane S. Bakeman published reviews of *Song of Solomon* in *The College Language Association Journal* in December 1977 and March 1978, respectively. Both reviewers find the writing style and the message commendable.

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Bakerman even says that the book was a "perfectly crafted novel which is about love." Adam Miller, in *The Black Scholar* (March 1978) said that he especially likes Morrison's characters and that the book conveys a "sense of Afro history." Then there is Barbara Christian, who writes a lengthy article in *The Journal of Ethnic Studies* (Winter 1980) discussing both the relationships between Morrison's characters and their "community" and their "value system." Christian concludes that *Song of Solomon* is a fable that is a lesson about life; read sympathetically, the novel teaches us about the "marvelous resiliency of nature and therefore of human society."

By 1979, critical responses to *Song of Solomon* (and the other two novels) begin to appear in very lengthy articles in academic journals, in books, and in dissertations. This may indicate that the earlier critics since 1970 had been right in proclaiming that Toni Morrison is to become an important American writer. These critics tend to be very serious scholars, and they scrutinize Morrison intensely. In some instances, they render scholarly expansion of some of the themes which earlier critics had enunciated, and in other instances they introduce new themes found in *Song of Solomon*.

For instance, Norris Clark's article in *Minority Voices: An*

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Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature and the Arts (Fall 1980) agrees with those earlier critics who said that Morrison's "literary creativity . . . adequately reflects the black American experience . . . but also reaches toward literary and epic proportions." Clark focuses on this one central idea and gives a careful and scholarly documentation of it. He argues eloquently that in *Song of Solomon* Morrison recreates a "universal myth." Clark argues that to a large extent this reliance on traditional mythology is what makes the novel a great novel.  

Wilfrid D. Samuels and A. Leslie Harris also write articles discussing the theme of mythology in *Song of Solomon*. Samuels' article, entitled, "Liminality and the Search for Self in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon,*" is also published in *Minority Voices: Interdisciplinary Journal of Literature and the Arts* (Fall 1981). Samuels asserts that one finds in *Song of Solomon* the classical mythological search for self. Harris' article, entitled "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon,*" appears in *Melus* (vol. 7, 1980). Harris explains Morrison's technique in using myth. Harris says that Morrison turns to myth to underpin her narrative, but does so without transforming her novel into pure fantasy or overloading her story with literary allusions. Morrison's success in making one black man's struggle for identity universal is partly


explained by her structural use of myth to show man's constant search for reassurance in myths.27

Beginning around 1979, Morrison's novel also becomes a focus of another genre of scholarly writing--dissertations. For example, in 1979 Gloria Shodgrass Malone completed a dissertation at Kent State University in which Song of Solomon is included. Malone's conclusion had been noted by earlier critics. She concludes that Morrison presents in much of her work a bleak, often despairing, picture of black family life in communities which frequently prove inimical to the well-being of the inhabitants. Some of Morrison's characters are the victims of cruelty inflicted upon them by members of their own families; others suffer from varied instances of exploitation, violation, and demoralization.28 In this study, Malone also examines The Bluest Eye and Sula.

There are several dissertations completed in 1980 that discuss Morrison's novels. Among those completing dissertations in 1980 are Norris Berkely Clark, who writes a dissertation at Cornell University, and Karen Carmean Gaston, who completes her dissertation at Auburn University. Clark's dissertation assesses the aesthetic qualities of Morrison's novels, while Gaston focuses on "The Theme of Female Self-Discovery in the Novels of Judith Rossner, Gail Godwin, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison,"29 None of the dissertations is exclusively about Toni Morrison.


29Norris Berkeley Clark, "The Black Aesthetic Reviewed: A Critical Examination of the Writings of Imamu Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn
Also, Song of Solomon is analyzed thoroughly in a book published by Scarecrow Press in 1979. The book, Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women, is authored by Anne Z. Mickleson. Morrison is discussed in chapter six of the book, which is entitled "Winning Upward: Black Women: Sarah E. Wright, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker." As the title of chapter six suggests, the focus is on black women. In discussing Song of Solomon, Mickleson focuses on Pilate, whom she accurately identifies as a model of a strong black woman. It is argued that of all the characters in Song of Solomon, Pilate is the only one who is really free. Pilate travels the entire United States as a migrant worker before settling down in a midwestern town. In Michigan, Pilate is set apart from all of the others, both physically and spiritually. Mickleson's summation is that "Pilate lived and embraced the very texture of life, but she knew that compassion and learning to care set the limits to freedom." 30

In many of the detailed scholarly essays in which Song of Solomon is discussed the critics also analyze The Bluest Eye and Sula, but there are also scholarly writings with The Bluest Eye as the main focus, or with Sula as the main focus, as well as writings that focus on both books. After the huge success of Song of Solomon, the first two novels seem to become more important, and are examined far more

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carefully. The later scholarly discourses on *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are published in such publications as *Black American Literature Forum*, *College Language Association Journal*, and even *Names: Journal of the American Name Society*. The earlier two novels are also discussed in two books--*Sturdy Black Bridges* (1979), by Roseann Bell, Bettye Parker and Beverly Sheftall, and *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976* by Barbara Christian. The analysis by Barbara is by far more penetrating. In this large volume, Christian devotes an entire chapter to Toni Morrison. Christian entitles her chapter five "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison." In this long chapter, Christian explains how Morrison is writing in the Afro-American tradition. However, Christian's main focuses in the book is on the Afro-American female-novelistic tradition. In doing so, Christian sees the two novels as feminist literature. Christian writes:

Both novels chronicle the search for beauty amidst the restrictions of life, both from within and without. In both novels, the black woman, as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured . . . Often they find that there is conflict between their own nature and the society that man has made, to the extent that one seems to be an inversion of the other.

This theme of the search for personal fulfillment by black women has been noted by other critics earlier, but here Christian explains it fully in her book. Moreover, the theme is explained in light of the Afro-American woman's novelistic tradition.

*Sturdy Black Bridges* is an anthology. To include a discussion of

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Morrison in an anthology provides a significant statement in itself of the importance of her work. In this volume, Morrison is cited for her fiction and for her abilities as an editor.\textsuperscript{32}

There is also a very significant article published in September of 1980 in Names: Journal of the American Name Society. In this article, Karen Stein focuses on an idea that had not received much attention in the earlier criticism of Sula. Stein's thesis is that "many of the character's names, like that of Ajax, conjure up heroes of literary tradition;" then Stein goes on to "explore the classical Greek and Biblical allusions which they evoke."\textsuperscript{33} Stein discusses Ajax and Helene from the Greeks and Eva and Hannah from the Bible.

In summary, Toni Morrison's third novel won her the very prestigious National Book Critics' Award for fiction in 1977. This award and subsequent critical acclaim, coupled with the financial success of Song of Solomon, made Morrison a premier contemporary American writer. Compared to the criticism of Morrison's prior two books, the volume of criticism of Song of Solomon was very high. The criticism appeared in popular periodicals, academic journals, dissertations and books. Generally, the critical assessments of the novel can be placed in three categories--Euro-American, Afro-American and feminist. The Euro-American critical perspective tends to focus on the classical elements of the novel; the Afro-American perspective


tends to include classical elements, but focuses on black awareness; and the feminist perspective tends to include classical elements and/or black awareness, but focuses on the problems of black feminine socialization.
CHAPTER IV
THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF TONI MORRISON: 1982 to 1986

This chapter will examine the critical responses to the fiction of Toni Morrison from 1982 to 1986. Much of the criticism during this period pertains to Morrison's fourth novel, Tar Baby. However, many critics were still responding to one or more of Morrison's three earlier novels. The body of criticism on the previous three novels during this period will be analyzed in this section, but it is necessary to present the critical responses to Tar Baby first.

The fact that Tar Baby received even greater immediate criticism than Morrison's prior three novels is due in part to the enormous amount of critical responses to Song of Solomon. Many critics, as well as general readers, had read Song of Solomon and the other two novels, and were eagerly awaiting another Morrison novel. This was the climate in which Tar Baby was introduced. By 1982 the name Toni Morrison was fairly well-known in contemporary American literary criticism. Moreover, Morrison had come to be regarded as one of America's most perceptive and serious contemporary writers. The criticism to be analyzed later in this chapter will support this assessment.

As was the case with Morrison's previous books, the initial reactions to Tar Baby appeared in trade publications such as
Publisher's Weekly (January 23, 1981), Booklist (January 15, 1981), Kirkus Review (January 1, 1981), and Library Journal (January 15, 1981). These very early responses praised the novel generously. They sought to link Tar Baby with Morrison's earlier successes, and went on to say that Tar Baby was an even greater accomplishment. For example, Publisher's Weekly (January 23, 1981) promoted the novel as Morrison's "most ambitious, and in many ways her most convincing." Likewise, Booklist (January 15, 1981) claims that "Morrison again makes eloquent use of mythology, this time blending into the fabric of her tale the myths of West Indian blacks." It is important to remember that a major goal of these trade publications is to promote the sale of books. This task is made easier because of the financial success of Song of Solomon. This renewed interest is not unusual, because often the success of a new novel by an author generates interest in previous works. Nonetheless, the result of these early promotional reviews of Tar Baby is that the book is vintage Toni Morrison, but better--better because Morrison takes risks and succeeds, said the critics. Unlike Morrison's previous novels, Tar Baby incorporates whites and West Indians. Also, unlike the other novels, Tar Baby includes a wider milieu, in that the settings include the Caribbean, New York City, and a small town in Florida called Eloe.

The discussion of Tar Baby moved from the trade publications that target book dealers as their primary audience to publications that are directed toward mass readership. In this category, critical reviews of

1Publisher's Weekly, 219 (January 23, 1981): 120.
Tar Baby appeared in publications such as Time magazine (March 16, 1981), Newsweek magazine (March 30, 1981), New York Times Book Review (March 29, 1981), New York Times (March 21, 1981), New York Review of Books (April 30, 1981), Village Voice (March 18, 1981), and Ms magazine (July 1981). Generally, the theme and tone of the criticism in this category of publications seem to say that, while there are some shortcomings in Tar Baby, it is nonetheless excellent reading. A review by R. Z. Sheppard in Time magazine (March 16, 1981) is typical of much of the criticism of Tar Baby published in these publications, which reached a vast number of general readers. Sheppard wrote that "Tar Baby, like the rabbit bait in the Uncle Remus tale, is the sort of novel one can get stuck on." Likewise, Madeline Lee's review in the feminist Ms magazine (July 1981) warned her basically white female audience to:

Ration yourself carefully, or the book will go by too fast. Rich, seductive, and still nourishing, it leaves whatever you are doing in real life looking rather disappointing.

A very significant fact that illustrates Toni Morrison's appeal to general readers, as well as that she had become an important American literary figure, is the fact that Newsweek magazine placed Morrison on the cover of its March 30, 1981 issue and included a lengthy article on her. Newsweek magazine is a weekly news magazine that speaks to millions of average Americans each week. The magazine attempts to explain significant events, people, and trends to the average American. Newsweek's selection of Morrison to appear on the

cover of the magazine, in the wake of the just-published *Tar Baby*, is the magazine's attempts to explain to its general readers (some of whom had read *Song of Solomon*) what scholars and literary critics had known for almost a decade—that Morrison was one of the foremost contemporary American writers. The lengthy article in *Newsweek* explains the essence of Morrison's works and gives some biographical information about the writer. In response to *Tar Baby*, Jean Strouse writes in *Newsweek* that:

> In the new novel, "Tar Baby," Morrison takes on a much larger world than she has before, drawing a composite portrait of America in black and white. She has produced that rare commodity, a truly public novel about the condition of society, examining the relations between blacks and whites, men and women, civilization and nature circa 1981. That may sound like it's good for you but no fun, but "Tar Baby" keeps you turning the pages as if to find out who killed J. R.5

In addition to the reviews in publications that target a vast mass audience, there were also reviews in publications that target particular segments of the general American reading public. This category of publications which published reviews of *Tar Baby* included *New Statesman* (October 23, 1981), *Progressive* (September 1981), *Black Enterprise* (July 1981), *Commentary* (August 1981), *Spectator* (December 1981), *New Republic* (March 21, 1981), *National Review* (June 26, 1981), *The Nation* (May 2, 1981), *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1981), *Yale Review* (Winter 1982), and *The Sewanee Review* (Fall 1981). Usually, the category of publications seem to target readers who have a higher educational level. In general, the critics writing in these publications spoke approvingly of *Tar Baby*. However, more negative

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criticism seems to appear in the reviews published in these publications. For instance, Angela Huth in *Listener* (December 17 and 24, 1981) criticized Morrison as having "not yet mastered subtlety of exposition: Her banal characters sit about telling each other things they must have known for years." Similarly, Edith Milton in the *Yale Review* (Winter 1982) felt that "Toni Morrison is too self-conscious in her effects." Also, in *Atlantic Monthly* Wilfrid Sheed observed that *Tar Baby* was Morrison's "weakest book so far." Sheed goes on to say that:

> With *Tar Baby*, Morrison has attempted to hitch another such bucking bronko of a theme onto a comedy of manners, and they're an odd pair. No sooner have we set up the thrumming poetry, the animistic sense that the clouds and trees are on to something big, than we are exchanging persiflage with some desiccated white folks and their gelded black retainers in a gingerbread house in the Caribbean.

Similar critical positions toward Morrison were also published by others such as David Kubal in the *Hudson Review* (Autumn 1981); Nicholas Shrimpton in *New Statesman* (October 23, 1981); and Pearl K. Bell in *Commentary* (August 1981). Ms. Bell writes:

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Even the title of *Tar Baby* contributes to the underlying confusion of Miss Morrison's story, her failure to consider the way a metaphor can mislead. In the Uncle Remus story, a tar baby is the black doll a white farmer puts into the cabbage patch to trap the thieving rabbit. As Son hurls the tale at his lover's head in their final quarrel, Valerian becomes the white man who made tar baby Jadine—but how, then, does Son stand for the rabbit who outsmarts the farmer and runs away? Why does he desperately try to find Jadine after she runs back to Paris? None of this makes much sense ...


There were also reviews to appear in another category of periodicals. There were reviews and articles on *Tar Baby* which appeared in publications that target a more restricted audience. The readers of this category of publications are highly educated, and many are also literary critics and scholars interested in the study of literature. This category of publications includes *Freedomways* (Fourth Quarter 1981), *Critique* (Spring 1983), *Sage* (Spring 1985), *Names: Journal of the American Name Society* (March 1984), *Studies in American Fiction* (Autumn 1986), *Mississippi Quarterly* (Winter 1984), *College Language Association Journal* (September 1981), *American Literature* (May 1984 and May 1986), and *Comparative Literature Study* (Fall 1985). In addition, the reviews and articles in these publications are not immediate reactions to the novel; rather, they are detailed, carefully thought out and essentially scholarly in

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These reviews and articles will be analyzed later in this chapter.

Tar Baby was also analyzed in dissertations. Like those articles published in the specialized journals that are geared toward literary scholars, the dissertations that included Tar Baby in their studies are also intended for literary scholars. This category of critics included dissertations by Madelyn Jablon, Shirley Marie Jordan, Geta Lesseur, Charles Nama, Angelita Dianne Reyes, and Danielle Kathleen Taylor. The critical conclusions found in these dissertations will also be reported later in this chapter.

There were also chapters and articles on Tar Baby that were included in books by literary critics. Like the specialized literary publications and the dissertations, these books are also directed primarily toward scholars interested in literary criticism. Some of the books that discuss the novel include Black Time by B. J. Barthold, the Afro-American Novel Since 1960, which is edited by Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer; Mythic Black Fiction by J. Campbell; Living Stories, Telling Lives by J. S. Frye; Terrorist and Novelists by D. Johnson; Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies, which is edited by Catherine Rainwater and William Schick; Reaching Out: Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women, by A. Z. Mickelson; Essays and Interviews on Black Women and Writing which is edited by Juliette Bowler; Feminist Revisions: What has been and Might Be, which is edited by Vivian Patrika Amid; Visions and Revisions: Poetry and Criticism on Literature and Arts, which is edited by Burney

12 See bibliography.
Many of the critics agreed that *Tar Baby* was enjoyable to read, and they told their readers as much. Like Morrison's previous three novels, *Tar Baby* opens with a prologue that introduces the protagonist, Son. Son is a young, semi-literate black man with an obscure past. This wanderer, as he first appears in the novel, has just jumped ship. He is hungry, and in his search for food he secretly enters the boat of Margaret and Jadine. Margaret and Jadine are enroute to L'Arbre de la Croix, as it is called. L'Arbre de la Croix is the largest mansion on the Caribbean island of Dominique. The huge house is owned by Valerian Street. Margaret is Valerian's wife, and Jadine is his protege. Valerian Street is the once proud owner of a very prosperous candy factory that he had inherited years before. For the past three years, Valerian has been retired to the island. Valerian has brought with him his servants—Ondine and Sidney. Margaret has not resigned herself to the island, but comes there only periodically. She usually lives in the United States. Jadine has been modeling in Paris. Both women are coming to the island for Christmas. Valerian and Margaret are expecting their son, Michael. Hidden on their boat, Son finds his way to the great house on the hill. He is only seeking food. However, he does not ask for food, but slips into the house at night while everyone is asleep and steals food. This skillful stealing continues for several days, so
when Margaret discovers Son hiding in her bedroom she becomes hysterical. However, instead of having the filthy intruder jailed, Valerian invites him to dinner. Valerian's response to the dirty black man shocks Margaret, as he knew it would, for Valerian had married a beauty queen from Maine who was far below him in social standing. The physical attraction was insufficient to sustain their marriage. Consequently, over the years since the marriage, Valerian has developed an immense and obsessive disdain for his wife.

Christmas Day came, but none of the expected guests arrived, including Michael. Therefore, Valerian invited the blacks--Ondine, Sidney and Son--to dine with him. It was at this point that all of the thoughts and feelings had been suppressed for many years erupted. Ondine questioned Valerian's firing of her kitchen employees, and this made Valerian angry. Ondine was further perturbed by the fact that Margaret took it upon herself to cook the Christmas dinner. A physical fight between Margaret and Ondine ensued. In uncontrollable rage, Margaret shouted to Ondine:

"Shut up! Shut up! You nigger! You nigger bitch! Shut your big mouth, I'll kill you!"

At this, Ondine could not withhold a dreadful domestic secret any longer. She reveals to everyone at the table:

"You cut him up. You cut your baby up. Made him bleed for you. For fun you did it. Made him scream, you, you freak. You crazy white freak. She did," Ondine addressed the others, still shouting. "She stuck pins in his behind. Burned him with cigarettes. Yes, she did, I saw her; I saw his little behind. She burned him."

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13Toni Morrison, Tar Baby (New York: New American Library, 1981), 179. All further page references to this work will be stated in the text.
Margaret as a sadistic villain is revealed. Valerian is speechless, as he "held on to the table edge as though it were the edge of the earth." (p. 179) Michael, the only son, had been tortured by his own mother, who seemed to be incapable of giving him love.

At first sight of each other, Jadine and Son fall in love. On that frenetic Christmas night, while the Street's house is in disarray, Jadine and Son consummate their love. The following morning Son has to leave the island immediately, because he has confronted Valerian. Jadine sends Son to New York City, and she follows him a few days later. In New York, they find a lover's paradise, and they do all the things that urban lovers do, but the sophistication of New York pervades Jadine's world. Son tries to adjust, but he cannot. Son insists that they go to Eloe, Florida. Inevitably, when the star-crossed lovers leave New York and arrive in Eloe, it is Jadine who cannot adjust. Jadine cannot communicate with Son's uneducated and ignorant father, nor with his aunt, cousins, or friends; predictably, Son moves among these people with ease. Therefore, Jadine leaves Eloe and returns to New York, for Son is to return to New York later. Nonetheless, Son will never see Jadine again. When he returns to New York, Jadine has decided to go back to Paris to continue her modeling career.

Jadine chooses her modeling career over a possible life with Son. Given Son's past, which will forever haunt him, Jadine makes the more sensible choice. However, just as she rejects Son, she must also necessarily sever her ties with the other black people in her life in the United States, including Sidney and Ondine. One of Jadine's greatest fears is that Sidney and Ondine will need her to stay and take
care of them. Jadine is trying to find out if her stepparents are going to ask her to stay when she asks Ondine: "So what's your situation here?" As Jadine asks the question, she is thinking to herself: "Please don't need me now." Unlike Sidney and Ondine, Jadine is unable to give of herself, for learning to give of herself freely requires a transition from girlhood to womanhood. Ondine sees it as her duty to try to teach Jadine how to make the transition. In the final confrontation with Ondine, who links Jadine to the many generations of black women, Jadine gets a bit of wisdom on how to be a woman:

Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first. She have to learn that. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man--good enough for the respect of other women. (p. 242)

As Jadine sits on the plane en route to Paris at the end of the novel, there is no indication that she takes Ondine's bit of wisdom with her.

Tar Baby, like Morrison's three earlier novels, received both positive and negative critical responses. However, this novel received more negative criticism than the previous three. Nonetheless, Tar Baby was still hailed by the critics as another triumphant achievement by Toni Morrison. Many critics saw Tar Baby as a better novel than Morrison's other works. Some critics felt that Tar Baby was richer because Morrison attempted, successfully, to broaden her scope. To this end, Morrison employed four significantly new elements in Tar Baby. First, Morrison included for the first time in her novels characters and customs from the Caribbean. Heretofore, Morrison's novels had been peopled solely by Afro-Americans and their customs. Secondly, Morrison also included a family of white characters
for the first time. Morrison also inserted a half-black and half-white character—Jadine. This is significant, because Jadine moves with ease in both black and white societies. Lastly, Morrison used three different settings in Tar Baby; in the previous novels there had been only one central setting.

Manifestly, this is indeed a very ambitious novel. Some critics felt that the novel was too ambitious. For example, Anatole Broyard in the New York Times (March 21, 1981) wondered "Why Miss Morrison, who won an important award with her last novel, has written so poorly in this one?" One problem he sees with Tar Baby is that it "may be described as a protest novel." Another problem is that Broyard doesn't think that the white characters were handled properly. Broyard asserts that Morrison's first attempt to handle white characters was a failure. Broyard concludes that one "may wonder why the black characters in Tar Baby have all the passion, while the white ones are fit only for sitting in greenhouses, manufacturing candy and sticking pins in their babies."

Broyard may be right in viewing Morrison's white characters as stereotypes. If this is true, Morrison is simply being consistent with a tradition in Afro-American fiction according to which black writers portray whites as being capable of enormous cruelty to blacks as well as to other whites. While Broyard's criticism may be valid, he may also be reacting to Morrison's direct and overt criticism of white society in America. The criticisms of white society in Morrison's previous three novels had merely been implied. For example, no white character is ever

14Anatole Broyard.
presented for scrutiny in *Sula*, but in *Tar Baby* the criticism of whites is direct and bitter. Consequently, some of the Euro-American critics writing in publications such as the *New York Times*, which promote Euro-American values, condemned *Tar Baby* for its direct criticism of those values. This is probably the case with Broyard when he condemns the entire novel as a failure. Like Broyard, John Irving in the *New York Times Book Review* (March 29, 1981) reacted negatively to *Tar Baby*. For Irving, *Tar Baby* suffers from "excessive use of dialogue" and remains "too lyrical."  

On the other hand, many reviews of *Tar Baby* in publications directed toward a general Euro-American audience had high praise for the novel. The following examples are representative. Some of these reviews appeared in *Ms* (July 1981), *Time* (March 16, 1981), *Newsweek* (March 30, 1981), and *Times Literary Supplement* (October 30, 1981).

In dissertations, *Tar Baby* begins to get a considerable amount of attention beginning around late 1983 and early 1984. Many of the dissertations that included a discussion of *Tar Baby* also examined Morrison's earlier three novels. For example, Danielle Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie's 1984 dissertation at Brown University examined all four of Morrison's novels. In the abstract of the dissertation published in *Dissertation Abstracts International*, Taylor-Guthrie says that the dissertation "illuminates the culture of black women" and attempts "to analyze and critique the art of black women writers." Speaking of Morrison's novels, Taylor-Guthrie says that the "novels

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15 John Irving.
illustrate the richness of black culture" and they have a "message of love." 16

Some dissertations did not focus entirely on Morrison, but included her novels while examining several other writers. Charles Atangana Nama conducted such a study. Nama's dissertation is entitled "Aesthetics and Ideology in African and Afro-American Fiction: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah, Toni Morrison and Richard Wright." In chapter four of his dissertation, Nama attempts to define feminist aesthetics in relationship to the Afro-American novel. It is in this chapter that he examines Morrison's four novels. Nama concludes that "Morrison is read as a precursor to feminist aestheticians." 17

Angelita Dianne Reyas also examined Tar Baby in chapter one of her 1985 dissertation at the University of Iowa. Like Taylor-Guthrie's, Shirley Jordan's 1985 dissertation focused on all four of Morrison's novels. Jordan's study found "two major kinds of women characters in Morrison's fiction: the doll baby and the grown-up woman." 18 There are other dissertations by Madelyn Hyla Jablon, Geta J. Lessuer and Jose David Saldinar who include Tar Baby in their study. 19


19See Bibliography.
In addition to the dissertations, there were scholarly articles published in publications that target literary scholars and critics. In this category of publications, the criticism was also mixed. That is, there appeared both negative and positive criticism. In these publications, the critics were more analytical and more specific, as they elaborated on the details of their discussions. Among those critics who found flaws in Morrison's work were Cynthia Dubin Edelberg and Nieda Spigner. Their criticisms were characteristic of Morrison's detractors. In *American Literature* (May 1986) Edelberg says that in *Tar Baby* Morrison denounces the value of education. Edelberg appears to be disagreeing with Morrison's overall vision in the novel. In asserting that Morrison is anti-education, Edelberg seems to infer that Morrison is also anti-American. More specifically, Edelberg says that Morrison sees the values that western education teaches as demonstrably destructive to blacks. This is in contrast to the high premium placed on education in the black community. To illustrate her thesis, Edelberg points toward Jadine in *Tar Baby*. Edelberg says that Jadine has a degree from the Sorbonne and that she is saturated with western values as a result of her education. Consequently, Jadine is torn between the black and the white worlds. Edelberg concludes her article by dismissing the novel and Morrison's entire argument.

Commenting on all of Morrison's characters and works, Edelberg writes:

These characters live in a brutal world from which there is no way out. Morrison posits a kind of primitivism as an answer, as something that counters education and works, but this primitivism is rhetorical rather than convincing. She woos us through her style, but cannot enlist us in her cause. In the hopelessness of the human situation she creates, Morrison's values are reduced to wishful thinking. To put it another way, she implies that "ancient properties" are better
than education and the work ethic, but dramatically shows us that they are not.20

With that, Edelberg rejects *Tar Baby* as being all style and no substance. The authoritative voice of *American Literature* speaks to Euro-American literary scholars and critics. The "us" means whites. Edelberg's reaction to the novel appears to be an overreaction. This is probably because she misunderstands the values that the novel energetically espouses. Moreover, in Jadine Morrison has created a character more complex than Edelberg admits.

Like Edelberg, Nieda Spigner castigated Morrison in *Freedomways* (Fourth Quarter 1981). Spigner says that Morrison peopled her novel with "a bunch of emotionally stressed jet-setters" and that *Tar Baby* is "only a dazzling example of marketability." Spigner goes on to say that the "manipulated characters ring true only within the fictional bounds the author has set."21

However, most of the critics writing in these specialized publications had positive reactions to *Tar Baby*. For example, in *Critique* (Spring 1983) Bonnie Shipman Lange published an article entitled "Toni Morrison's Rainbow Code." In this article, Lange asserted that Morrison's "Writings reveal a very clear system of color imagery." Lange says that Morrison's use of colors such as "blue, white, red, green, yellow, brown, silver, gold and black, each of which is used to evoke a unique and particularly representative

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response of sensual experience." Lange further explains this color code in *Tar Baby:*

Research revealed that people who dislike red often have been oppressed and frustrated. Morrison is a member of an oppressed race and sex; she began writing shortly after going through a divorce. Perhaps not coincidentally, red is the dominant color of the earlier three novels--while Morrison herself felt most oppressed--but a shift to a dominance of yellow occurs in *Tar Baby* with the haunting image of the women in yellow who appears to Jadine throughout the work. Not only for reasons of plot, but with this shift in color imagery, *Tar Baby* appears to be a more optimistic novel than Morrison's earlier works.

In closing, Lange says that "Morrison's works have many more references to colors--hardly a page is without a color word."²² As this article reveals, the critics writing in these specialized literary publications tended to focus on very specific issues, as they attempted to place the novel in perspective.

Charles Fishman's article in *Names: Journal of the American Name Society* explores the reasons why Morrison chose the names of characters and places in *Tar Baby.* Fishman finds two important reasons for the naming process used by Morrison. First, it is "a desire to make clear distinctions, to suggest connections or motifs within the text, or layer patterns that extend between texts, and to erect borders--a will toward accuracy and richness." And secondly, many of the names "elevate the narrative to a land of myth." For illustration, Fishman points toward names in the novel such as L'Arbre de la Croix, which

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literally means Tree of the Cross, Star Konigsgaarten, which means King's Great Garden, and Eloie, which means Elohim or God.  

Peter B. Erickson also praised *Tar Baby* in his September 1981 article in the *College Language Association Journal*. Erickson places *Tar Baby* in the category of feminist literature when he says that the main issue in *Tar Baby* is the "generational continuity among black women." However, in the novel "we are made more aware of these disconnections rather than the connections among the principal black women: Therese, Ondine, and Jadine." The novel mainly focuses on Jadine, Erickson says. Jadine rejects motherhood and the idea of "nurturing" in search of "originality." The other black women, Ondine and Therese, accept their roles of nurturing.  

Terry Otten also wrote approvingly of *Tar Baby* in an article in *Studies in American Fiction* (Autumn 1986). Otten shows that in *Tar Baby* Morrison proves that "evil can be redemptive and goodness can be enslaving." This inversion "does not restrict so much as enlarge the scope of her [Morrison's] vision." Otten's argument says that in order for one to have a moral awakening one must first plunge into evil. He argues that Morrison's characters that remain innocent become enslaved because a "fall from innocence is ironically essential to being."  

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While Otten does not mention it in his article, this concept had been espoused by Dostoevski in *Crime and Punishment* (1866). In Dostoevski's novel the schizophrenic hero, Raskolnikov, learns that happiness must be earned through guilt and suffering. Obviously, Morrison has read and admired Dostoevski.

Elizabeth B. House also sees the novel as espousing humanistic values, as she explains in an article in *American Literature* (May 1984). House says that in *Tar Baby* Morrison "affirms the superiority of idyllic values over competition; she clearly details the negative consequences of valuing power or wealth more than other people."26

Also during the period from 1982 to 1986, critical discussions on *Tar Baby* were included in books. For example, Barbara Christian's *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) devotes two chapters to Morrison's novels. Chapter four is entitled, "Testing the Strength of the Black Cultural Bond: Review of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby.*" Actually, chapter four is a review that was published earlier in 1981 in a book called *In These Times.* In this review, Christian points to the heart of the matter when she asserts that:

> The most critical conflict in the novel, however, is between the values of the individualistic, materialistic Jadine and the root-bound Son.27

This theme was also pointed out by other critics. But Christian goes further, to say that *Tar Baby* raises more questions than it answers:


The critical questions that Morrison asks in this novel are whether there is a functional black culture in the present-day west, a contemporary black community that is held together by bonds that work. Are blacks essentially upwardly mobile? Is color merely a camouflage? Is race in America operating as a communal bond or is it merely an indication of a past history once functional but no longer perceived by contemporary blacks as operative in their responses to each other?28

Chapter five in Christian's book is called "The Concept of Class in the Novels of Toni Morrison." This discussion asserts that Tar Baby and the other three novels constitute Morrison's attempt to "analyze the relationship between class, race, and gender." Christian concludes that this is consistent with the tradition of fiction by Afro-American women.

**Black Women Writers 1950-1980** by Maria Evans (1984) also includes discussions of Tar Baby. Included in Evans' book is an essay by Dorothy H. Lee which asserts that each of Morrison's four novels is "a part of a whole." Lee concurs with Barbara Christian when she states that Tar Baby deals with the "effect of the community on the individual's achievement and retention of an integrated, acceptable self."29 Evans' book also includes another article by Darwin Turner, who discusses elements such as theme, characters and style in Morrison's novels.30

In another book, **Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies**, edited by Catherine Rainwater and William Scheick, there

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28Ibid.


is a chapter by Linda Wagner entitled, "Toni Morrison: Mastery of Narrative." According to Wagner, the power of Morrison's narrative style is what makes her a great writer. Wagner concludes: "To read Morrison without attention to her narrative structures and methods is to obscure her always careful relation of character to theme, shape to form, voice to effect."31

A discussion of Morrison's Tar Baby is also included in the book, Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition (1985), edited by Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers. In this volume, Tar Baby is discussed in chapters four and fourteen and in the afterword. Elizabeth Schultz discusses the novel in chapter four, which is entitled "Out of the Woods and into the World: A Study of Interracial Friendships Between Women in American Novels." Schultz summarizes the theme of Tar Baby by saying that the novel's main point is:

Racial power plays cannot go unchallenged. If the white and black women in Tar Baby move toward a friendship in the novel's conclusion, it is because they have confronted head-on the stereotypes and emotions generated by racism.32 Schultz disagrees with Barbara Christian and other critics who insist that Tar Baby reinforces stereotypes. To the contrary, Schultz posits that Tar Baby "establishes the open confrontation of racial stereotypes as the necessary basis for an interracial friendship."33


33Ibid., p. 82.
Chapter fourteen of *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition* is an article by Barbara Christian called "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction." Here Christian echoes some of her earlier criticism of *Tar Baby* by saying that the novel is "pessimistic." According to Christian, the pessimism is seen through Jadine, who is:

portrayed as the woman who has taken on a position so far removed from her community that she becomes a part of the West. In her search for self she becomes selfish; in her desire for power, she loses essential parts of herself.34

Also published in 1985 was a book devoted entirely to Morrison's four novels. The book, *The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism*, was written by Bessie W. Jones and Audry L. Vinson, two professors at Alabama A&M University. The book encompasses nine essays; however, only one discusses *Tar Baby*. The essay on *Tar Baby* by Professor Jones is called "Garden Metaphor and Christian Symbolism." It compares the "exotic Caribbean Island" in *Tar Baby* with Milton's depiction of Eden in *Paradise Lost*. Jones asserts that the landscape of the novel is symbolic. Unlike other critics, Jones sees the novel as having an optimistic vision. She writes:

"Morrison's moral vision is reflected in the optimism with which the novel ends."35


In the academic periodicals listed above, the critics discuss elements of Morrison's novels that include structuralism, racism, symbolism, existentialism, alcoholism, thwarted sensitivity, mythology, love, characterization, the semantics of naming, the journey motif, the nature of desire, the role of blues, the sweetness motif, and the search-for-identity motif. These elements have been identified as themes in some of the earlier immediate responses to the novel. However, the treatment of the elements in these publications is different, in that they are discussed at length by a different kind of critic.

While the three novels since *Tar Baby* are discussed extensively
in this body of literature, *Song of Solomon* is discussed more often and at greater length. There are approximately twice as many articles with *Song of Solomon* as their primary focus as there are which focus on both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* combined. One possible reason for the amount of attention given *Song of Solomon* is that the novel had won Morrison a very significant award, the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1977, and the critics may have deemed the book more important for that reason. Other possible reasons may include the facts that *Song of Solomon* was more recently published and lengthier and that the protagonist was masculine. There are, however, articles that discuss the three novels collectively.

A review of the criticism of *Song of Solomon* during this period reveals that the critics agreed that the single element that raises this book to the category of a great novel is that this novel employs the classical scheme of the traditional novelistic structural pattern. The traditional novelistic structural pattern uses the classical and mythic theme of self-discovery by which the protagonist gains some knowledge about himself or herself. Spallino, Weixlmann, and Royster's statements are typical of many critics. Chiara Spallino's article in *Callaloo* (no. 25, Fall 1985), entitled "*Song of Solomon*: An Adventure in Structure," carefully details the structural pattern of the novel and explains how the pattern inextricably links itself to the main theme of the novel. Spallino writes:

The chronicle of Milkman's private story (the definition of his environment and of his life until the age of thirty-six) is completed with several other "motifs" which contribute to the preparation of the adventure. The author's intention in the first part is to counterpoint the movement toward the evolution of the protagonist with a movement toward the disclosure of the past. Her aim is to follow her hero in his search for maturity.
The novel can thus be classified as a Bilddungsroman insofar as the narration follows the growth and the development of the protagonist's personal identity from his birth until the age of thirty-six, when he seems to have learnt to "fly." Milkman's progress is depicted through a number of episodes in which he becomes aware of his relationship with his family (and consequently with his culture and society) by gaining knowledge of his heritage and roots.36

Joe Weixlmann echoes Spallino and others when he writes that Song of Solomon employs "one of the most traditional and realistic of Western fictional vehicles."37 Philip M. Royster is also very clear on the search motif. Royster says that "Milkman's progress, or the development of his identity, is depicted by a series of episodes during which he discovers his relationship to his family (and thereby his culture and society) by gaining knowledge of the family's identity and heritage or roots."38 In The Southern Review, Valerie Smith agrees with Royster and other critics concerning the quest motif, but she also sees the same motif in both The Bluest Eye and Sula.39

There were also some critics who discussed the quest motif in relationship to other motifs. For example, Harue Minakawa, writing in Kyushu American Literature (no. 26, October 1985), discusses "The Motif of Sweetness in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon." Minakawa explains


that his article "attempts to show how the motif of sweetness works in the book, especially in relation to Milkman's transcendence. Milkman is a frustrated hero, yet his search for lost gold turns out to be a quest for identity, revealing a panoramic view of the Afro-American experience, as well as the hero's belatedly acquired self-fulfillment."\textsuperscript{40} Minakawa's "sweetness motif" in this article clarifies the references in the novel to "artificial sweets" as being synonymous with love and goodness. However, as his thesis clearly states, the real focus of the article is the quest motif, with only references to the "sweet motif."\textsuperscript{41} There are several critics who discuss the quest theme in relationship to other related themes. Some critics in this category include Allison A. Bulsterbaum, who discusses "folksong," Charles Scruggs, who discusses "desire," Joyce M. Wegs, who discusses "blues songs," and Robert James Butler, who discusses "open movement."\textsuperscript{42}

As aforementioned, characters are frequently discussed in the articles. The characters most often discussed are Milkman and Pilate. It is the protagonist Milkman, however, who commands most

\textsuperscript{40}Harve Minakawa, "The Motif of Sweetness in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," Kyushu American Literature (no. 26 October 1985): 47.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., pp. 48-54.

attention. This is also true of the criticism immediately following the publication of the novel.

The criticism of The Bluest Eye and Sula seems to be relegated basically to discussions of characters and social conduct. In this instance, the titles of these articles are revealing, in that they give some clues as to the elements discussed in the criticism. Some of the titles of articles are: "The Scary Fall of the Self: An Analysis of the Character of Sula in Toni Morrison's Sula," "Toni Morrison's Sula: A Black Woman's Epic," "Sula: An Experimental Life," "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," "The Novels of Toni Morrison: Studies in Thwarted Sensitivity," and "Alcoholism and Family Abuse in Maggie and The Bluest Eye."

As for characters, Sula and Pecola Breedlove are discussed most often probably because they are more skillfully and more fully drawn, and therefore more interesting. Understandably, some critics believe that they should be discussed together. Here Naana Banyiwa-Horne's comments are typical. Banyiwa-Horne says that "Sula shares a kinship with Morrison's female characters like Pecola Breedlove."43 She explains that while Pecola accepts the values that lead to her destruction, "Sula protects herself against the mean world with a meanness which bristles against the hostility of the world." In this sense Sula is Pecola's alter ego. Another common topic of discussion in The Bluest Eye and Sula is racism and the resulting social behavior. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi writes that "Toni Morrison's

The Bluest Eye is a novel portraying in poignant terms the tragic condition of blacks in America. Similarly, in her discussion of the destruction that alcoholism causes in The Bluest Eye, Rosalind Murphy Baum asserts: "The alcoholism occurs because of economic and cultural stress and the characters' attempts to escape that stress, but even more because of the individual and family patterns which have emerged, not necessarily to deal with this stress."

In addition to the many periodicals, Morrison's novels before Tar Baby were also analyzed in books between 1982 and 1986. Some of the books to include discussions of the novels were Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, edited by Shari Benstock; Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean and the United States, by Bonnie J. Barthold; Paradoxical Resolutions: American Fiction and James Joyce, by Craig Hansen Weiner; Terrorists and Novelists, by Diane Johnson; Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women in the Novel in Contemporary Experiences, by Joan S. Frye; The Afro-American Novel Since 1960, edited by Bruck and Kaner; Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition, edited by Pryse and Spillers; and The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism, by Jones and Vinson.

Many of the elements which the critics discuss in the books listed above are similar to the topics discussed in the periodical


articles. The searching motif and the problems of social conduct as a result of racism are discussed at length. However, there are some topics discussed in the books that are only briefly mentioned or are only alluded to in the periodicals. These topics include feminine social conduct, psychological disorientation, anarchy, and the grotesque.

By 1984, it becomes apparent that *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are clearly classified as feminist novels. The classification had been made many years earlier in the 1970's, but now the evidence is more substantial. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are almost always included in books whose primary focus is feminist literature, particularly black feminist literature. To include these novels in books suggests a more permanent and widely accepted classification. Some of the books that focus on feminine literature, which also discussed *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, are *Living Stories, Telling Lives: Women and the Novel in Contemporary Experience*, *Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship*, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* and * Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*.


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In the growing up process, narrative is both a powerful cultural tool for reinforcing the status quo and a powerful personal tool for shaping individual identity. The implications for a growing girl are clear: she needs stories to help interpret her life and she needs to resist the patterns of the known stories, which define femininity as the goal of her growth.47

Frye goes on to say that The Bluest Eye is a narrative about a black girl growing up.

The culture texts of both race and sex can interact with especially destructive power in the developing self-awareness of black girls growing up in a white-dominant society. In the literary characterization of black women's lives, this destructive power is nowhere more evident than in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye.48

Writing of Sula in Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship, Hortense J. Spillers not only places the novel in the feminist tradition but goes on to call it a "breakthrough toward the assertion of what we may call, in relation to her [Morrison] literary 'relatives,' new female beings."49 Spillers defines the "breakthrough" by saying that Sula is a kind of "counter mythology," which means "she is no longer bound by the rigid pattern predictions, predilections, and anticipations." Spillers concludes that the revelation that Sula "has the will toward rebellion itself is the stunning idea."50


48Ibid., p. 98.


50Ibid., p. 204.
Like Spillers and other critics, Barbara Christian agrees that these novels relate "the definition of woman in relation to race and class assumptions."\(^5\)

In sum, the criticism reveals that in *Tar Baby* Morrison broadened her perspective significantly by including and commenting on white characters for the first time. In addition, the fact that books and chapters in books are being devoted to Morrison and her works mean that *Tar Baby* and the previous novels are perceived as important contributions to American letters. In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison is able to handle five significant but difficult writing techniques at once, which makes her novel so appealing to different kinds of readers. First, Morrison's approach to her subject is unique in that her protest, while vigorous, is extremely subtle. There is little or no preaching in *Tar Baby*. Morrison is almost as objective as a writer can be. Secondly, Morrison shows great skill at the art of characterization. Both Jadine and Son are virtually fully developed characters. Thirdly, Morrison is able to espouse feminist issues without becoming obsessive or arrogant. Fourthly, Morrison is able to use the language with precision. Then, Morrison is able to comment on white society and black society, even when it appears that she is commenting on neither. Because Morrison is able to skillfully handle many literary techniques at once, critics and readers from three literary traditions

find the novel interesting as well as intellectually stimulating. Therefore, all of the many critical responses can be placed within three categories—Euro-American, Afro-American, and the feminist tradition. Some critical responses, however, can be placed within two or more categories. Finally, Morrison's uniqueness lies in her ability to appeal to these three audiences at once.
This chapter will assess the critical reception of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Beloved. The chapter will only include the criticism from 1987, when the novel was published, to 1988. Primarily, the available criticism of the novel for this period consists of book reviews. Undoubtedly, the lengthier, scholarly, and more scrutinizing critical reactions will be forthcoming.

As a Pulitzer Prize-winner, Beloved must be placed in a different category from Morrison's previous four novels. The most telling incident that summarizes the reception of the book is the fact that it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. Obviously, the Pulitzer Prize is a coveted award for writers because it elevates them to a new and loftier status. In the United States, the Pulitzer Prize distinguishes a writer as no amount of other positive criticism can. After such an achievement, neither a writer nor his or her writings can be responded to in the same manner as before the prize was awarded. Morrison's new and loftier status is reflected in the criticism between 1987 and 1988, because there are only a few negative comments about Beloved.

By 1987, seventeen years after the first novel was published, any book from Morrison commanded attention because of the reception of the
earlier four novels. Shortly after *Beloved* was published, a large group of well-known Afro-American writers and critics felt that *Beloved* was worthy of the Pulitzer. The group included Alice Walker, a Pulitzer Prize-winner herself. The group wrote an open letter, published in *The New York Times Book Review* (January 24, 1988), stating its position. The black literati argued that despite Morrison's "international stature" she had not received the "national recognition" she deserved for writing five major novels. This open letter may have had some impact on the final decision to award the prize to *Beloved*. However, even before the prize was awarded, the reviews are almost unanimous in praising *Beloved*.


sentiments are further echoed by Paul Gray, whose reviews appear in 
*Time* Magazine. Gray explains how Morrison takes the familiar subject 
of slavery and creates a new, insightful and refreshing novel. Gray 
explains that *Beloved* is insightful and refreshing because unlike most 
novels about slavery this one "does not reinforce received opinions 
but disturbs them." Likewise, Walter Clemons' review in *Newsweek* 
(September 29, 1987) agrees with Gray and gives further praise by 
saying that with *Beloved* Morrison did something "no novelist has ever 
approached before." Clemons asserts that in *Beloved* Morrison has 
"re-created" the "interior life" of slaves. It is necessary to re-
create because in "addressing sympathetic whites, blacks tactfully 
suppressed feelings of outrage that might offend their hearers." 
Perhaps Margaret Atwood's comment in *The New York Times Book Review* 
(September 13, 1987) captures best the general tone and timber of the 
early critical responses to *Beloved*. Atwood writes:

> If there were any doubts about her [Morrison's] stature as a 
> pre-eminent American novelist, of her own or any other 
> generation, "Beloved" will put them to rest.  

Atwood feels that *Beloved* shows Morrison's versatility, as well as her 
wide "technical" and "emotional" ranges. The criticism frequently 
reminds that some of Morrison's usual themes and narrative techniques 
are also present in *Beloved*. Some of the usual themes of the criticism 
include:

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3Walter Clemons, "A Gravestone of Memories," *Newsweek* 

4Margaret Atwood, "Haunted by Their Nightmare," *New York Times 
As is Ms. Morrison's trademark, she mixes folklore, legend, myth and surrealism with realism to pull the reader into her world. And without fail it works.\(^5\)

As McMillan and others note, characteristically, Toni Morrison is able to control several elements at once. In this regard, the narrative method of *Beloved* is similar to that of the earlier four novels; it is distinctive and undeniably Morrisonian. Moreover, the narrative method helps to create the subject matter. For example, McMillan also notes that Morrison's narrative method "provides" part of the element of mysticism in the novel. She writes:

Most of what happens in this novel happens in the past. It's [sic] zigzagginess provides a dreamlike, eerie quality. The past is constantly relived in the minds of characters, and it is alive. Sometimes, one may seem to have missed something, because the story line is like a spider spinning its web, round and round to the center. Prose of this nature is explosive and dense. Things happen over and over again, from different angles, different perspectives, so much that one sometimes has to exhale or even cry.\(^6\)

Michiko Kakutani also notes this correlation:

These events unfold before us, like dream images, in a succession of lyrical passages that jump back and forth in time, back and forth in point of view from one character to another. As a result, there is a contemporaneous quality to time past and time present as well as a sense that the lines between reality and fiction, truth and memory, have become inextricably blurred: by the end, we see Beloved as Sethe herself does, as both daughter and ghostly apparition.\(^7\)

While Morrison's narrative method in *Beloved* is similar to the method employed in the other novels, there is a significant difference.

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\(^6\)Ibid.

Beloved is quite different from the other novels in that it is a historical novel. Morrison's narrative method is superimposed on a historical novel and that produces a unique result. The "zigzagginess" used to cover many years is difficult to handle. Yet, according to the critics, Morrison is successful. Writing about Beloved as a historical novel, McMillan says:

A novel of this magnitude and scope, tackling and unveiling the intimate thoughts, fears, feelings and hopes of slaves, far surpasses any documentation seen in a history book.8

Another characteristic of Morrison's narrative method is her ability to tell a fascinating story. While there were mythic elements in Morrison's previous novels, Beloved is the first Morrison novel to explore in detail a blend of myth and surrealism. The plot of Beloved is a surrealistic story about Sethe's attempt to cope with the dehumanizing institution of slavery. Out of a profound and uncompromising maternal love, Sethe decapitates her older daughter in order to prevent the daughter from being returned to the Sweet Home Plantation to experience slavery. The success of the novel is due, in large part, to the plot as it is told through Morrison's narrative method. Morrison balances present action against flashbacks. The central action in the novel occurs eighteen years after Sethe has escaped from slavery in Kentucky to freedom across the Ohio River to Cincinnati. Some eighteen years before, while Sethe was yet a young girl, she had been sold to Mr. Gardner, owner of the Sweet Home Plantation. At Sweet Home, Sethe became a house servant and married Halle. Mr. Gardner was the rare slave owner who treated his slaves

8Terry McMillan.
humanely. He died suddenly and unexpectedly, and the management of Sweet Home passed to the severe and cruel overseer, School Teacher. Under School Teacher's dominance, slavery to Sethe became unbearable, and she decided that it was worth the risk to seek freedom by crossing the Ohio River. The escape plan worked. After much hardship en route, which included the birth of a baby, Sethe arrived at freedom. Unfortunately, within twenty-eight days School Teacher had tracked Sethe down to the house at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati. When Sethe recognized the severe overseer coming, she seized her four children, which included two sons, and ran to the woodpile intending to kill them all rather than to allow them to be taken South to slavery. Before Sethe was stopped, she had already decapitated her older daughter. Sethe was tried, imprisoned and later released. The law, the church and the community condemned Sethe for the murder without reservation. Nevertheless, as Morrison explores the act from Sethe's point of view, the reader comes to understand her suffering, as well as her pride, rage and despair.

Sethe, who had little contact with other human beings except her daughter and mother-in-law for nearly eighteen years, develops a relationship with Paul D. Sethe has known Paul D since the days of her bondage at Sweet Home. Upon Paul D's arrival, he must exorcise the house at 124 Bluestone Road of a terrifying poltergeist which has driven Sethe's two sons away by causing objects to become animated. Paul D possesses the power that is necessary to drive the intrusive spirit away temporarily. The spirit is that of the dead child.

A few days after Paul D's exorcism of the haunting, invisible presence, a young black woman named Beloved appears mysteriously.
Nobody knows who she is or whence she has come. Since Beloved is the same age as the murdered child would have been had she lived, it is believed that she is the spirit of the dead child reincarnated. It is at this point that Beloved becomes a ghost novel. An intense and unusual friendship develops between Sethe and Beloved. Morrison writes:

Denver [Sethe's youngest daughter] thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; [Sethe had killed the child with a handsaw.] Beloved was making her pay for it.9

After draining much of the life out of Sethe and edging her close to insanity, Beloved is exorcised from 124 Bluestone Road. As the novel closes, Sethe, emotionally and psychologically exhausted, finally arrives at some sort of peace within herself.

Because this story is so fascinating, Morrison will pursue it further. In a conversation with Miriam Horn, published in U.S. News & World Report (October 19, 1987), Morrison says that she will continue with the lives of the characters in Beloved. Speaking of Beloved, Morrison is quoted as saying: "So I'm not finished with these people, and they are not finished with me. We have this hiatus right now. But I guess they are all waiting out there for me to come back."10

Nevertheless, Morrison's telling an interesting story in a see-saw method explains only part of what the novelist does in Beloved. In addition to telling an interesting story in a see-saw method,

Morrison is also able to use the language eloquently to create effective images and an array of emotions. Claudia Smith Brinson says

Beloved is "told in gorgeous words and rhythms." Yet it "hurts to read Beloved."11 Morrison can take her reader from tears to laughter almost at will. Margaret Atwood says:

Beloved is written in antiminimalist prose that is by turn rich, graceful, eccentric, rough, lyrical, sinuous, colloquial and very much to the point.12

In each case, Morrison does it "with an immediacy that is impossible to resist."13

While controlling all of these technical elements at once, Morrison is also able to employ her familiar and relevant themes in Beloved. These themes seem to be even more relevant and real because Morrison "writes from what she knows ... and what she knows was learned from being black and from being a woman."14 These factors, as revealed in the criticism by mainstream Americans, can account for some of the critical acclaim of Beloved. These critics seem to be amazed that Morrison could handle so many literary elements as skillfully as she does.

However, some of the same factors construed as admirable by some critics are seen as novelistic flaws by other critics. For example, a review in Choice says that "the continued employment of flashbacks in

12 Margaret Atwood.
14 Claudia Smith Brinson.
latter novel [Beloved] leads to confusion."\(^{15}\) Also, in a discussion on Morrison's use of the language, a critic states: "This language is powerful but manipulative."\(^{16}\) Similarly, Carol Iannone writes that:

> But the book grows massive and heavy with cumulative and oft-repeated miseries, with new miseries and new dimensions of miseries added in each telling and retelling long after the point has been made and the reader has grown numb. The graphic descriptions of physical humiliation begin to grow sensationalist and the gradual unfolding of secret horror has an unmistakably Gothic dimension which soon comes to seem merely lurid, designed to arouse and entertain.\(^{17}\)

However, these few critics who point out blemishes in the novel do it apologetically and admit that "there are [also] many compelling elements in Beloved . . ."\(^{18}\)

While Morrison sustains an ability to skillfully control many technical and literary elements simultaneously, a quality which most critics found admirable, she is also careful to include elements in Beloved that appeal specifically to Afro-Americans. Beloved draws on Afro-American "shared memories" more than any other Morrison novel. Basically, Morrison does this by her selection of subject matter, settings and characters. For subject matter, Morrison selects the institution of slavery and the period of Reconstruction that followed. For one setting, she employs the Sweet Home Plantation. Morrison's characters are basically Afro-Americans placed in different settings

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18Ibid.
and situations. The Afro-American critics react to these powerful images because they can logically assume that their readers will also react to these images. Martha Southgate quickly points out in Essence that Beloved brings back the "horror of slavery." Trudier Harris cannot resist discussing the dehumanizing treatment of "slaves on the Sweet Home Plantation," even when her main topic is feminist concerns in Beloved.

In addition, Morrison is careful to appeal to feminists. The Essence reviewer, like Trudier Harris, raises the question of the "rights of motherhood." The Essence reviewer writes: "A young mother, Sethe, kills her child rather than see her sold into slavery." Trudier Harris goes further and contends that Beloved is concerned mainly with black feminist issues. She says:

In addition to questions about the rights of motherhood, the book also returns to a concentration on black women. There is a tremendous strength and power in Sethe's determination to escape from slavery in spite of being eight months pregnant and in spite of having been tortured by the overseer and his two sadistic nephews. There is certainly strength in her decision to prevent her children from being slaves, as well as in the communal isolation she suffers once she is known as a "murderer." But the greater power of black womanhood comes in the women who exorcize Beloved from 124 Bluestone Road. They are initially reminiscent of the women in Sula, those who were strong enough to let evil run its course. The women here finally conclude, however, that Beloved has overstepped her bounds in making demands of the living; they all admit, as Baby Suggs has done earlier, that just about every black house in those post-slavery days probably has some poor ghost looking for something or somebody. But for Beloved to appear and assume to herself the right to punish Sethe is something they

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19 Martha Southgate.
21 Martha Southgate.
will not tolerate. They therefore use Pagan and Christian methods—church songs and charms—to exorcize the pregnant Beloved. In this rite of exorcism, this restoration of the status quo, the women favor the living over the dead, mother love over childish punishment of parents, reality over the legend of which they have become a part.\textsuperscript{22}

But Morrison's appeal to feminists reaches beyond black feminist issues. A review in Ms magazine says that Beloved, as well as Morrison's other novels, poses questions for all women. The reviewer writes:

Morrison's women—some are big, powerful people, others shadows and totally powerless, some risk takers, others safety seekers. But through all of them, Morrison asks us, What's power? What's love? What's the real cost of living? Who and what can you claim and/or control? What tricks do you have to play in order to get through? How do you define yourself?\textsuperscript{23}

In summary, Beloved has to be considered Toni Morrison's most acclaimed novel because it won a Pulitzer Prize. The Prize is a major distinction for Morrison. Also, Morrison is able to appear to three distinctive groups simultaneously. The criticism of Beloved consists mainly of responses by the three groups. Consequently, the critical reactions can be placed within three categories: those reactions arising from Euro-Americans, those arising from Afro-Americans, and those arising from feminists drawn from both groups.

\textsuperscript{22}Trudier Harris.

CONCLUSION

When The Bluest Eye, Morrison's first novel, was published in 1970, the author was virtually unknown as a writer and only a relatively few critics responded to the novel. Most significant are early positive reviews in the influential New York Times Book Review and the widely circulated Newsweek magazine. Without this very early exposure to a large general audience and to other critics, Morrison might have gone relatively unknown for several decades and many novels later, as is the case with some writers. Sula, the second novel by Morrison, was also critically acclaimed and, by a larger and more varied group of critics. In addition to the mainstream critics and the Afro-American critics, feminist critics begin to point out feminist issues in both of the novels. It is at this point that three distinctly different schools of criticism emerge. The criticism is now categorized as Euro-American, Afro-American and feminist. The critics in each category become more numerous and are consequently more clearly discernable as they respond to Morrison's third novel, Song of Solomon. This novel, along with the previous two, earns Morrison enough respect to be labeled as "an American writer." This respect is manifested in the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award, which was awarded for Song of Solomon in 1977. Tar Baby, Morrison's fourth novel, solidifies Morrison's earned respect. By
1982, critics writing lengthy scholarly articles, dissertations and books were responding to Morrison's novels. Still, the three schools of critics are discernable. *Beloved*, the fifth novel by Morrison, received the highest possible criticism in the United States by winning the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. In the criticism of *Beloved*, the three schools of criticism are still apparent.

But what is the sociological significance of the criticism in each school? And what is the sociological significance of the total body of criticism of the five Morrison novels?

The hypothesis of this study, which states that Toni Morrison drew on three convergent literary traditions for ideas, meaning and structure, is evident by the appeal of the novels and by the three schools of critical responses to the novels. But why did each school of critics respond as it did?

Generally, mainstream critics were first captivated by what Morrison could do with the language in *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. The criticism shows that with the publication of each new novel this factor is pointed out again and again. Then, with each new novel, Morrison is able to add and control a larger number of technical and literary elements as well as themes and ideas. Karla Halloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos also notes this progression:

> Each of Morrison's novels enlarges its scope over the previous one, encompassing her psychological and spiritual growth. Each novel also incorporates more elements of Morrison's diverse and broad social background and becomes increasingly open in form and more ambiguous as to the endings and closures in its characters' lives. Epiphany, both embraced and turned from, becomes more possible in each novel.¹

By and large, mainstream critics applauded Morrison's efforts. In addition, the criticism says that Morrison is able to make provocative statements about American society and about the human race. Mainstream critics, with few exceptions, also find this admirable. Morrison places her fiction well within the Euro-American literary tradition. She criticizes, like William Faulkner and other Euro-American writers, but never ridicules, and, she is able to use the English language with precision. These are highly valued skills for writers in the Euro-American literary tradition.

While most of the Afro-American critics respond to many of the same elements as Euro-American critics, the Afro-American critics also respond to factors decidedly different in the novels. In each novel Morrison writes basically about Afro-Americans and their pains and pleasures. In each novel Morrison's characters face challenging situations. Situations where Afro-Americans are: trying to define beauty in America, searching for their African heritage, trying to define themselves, being caught between the powerful demands of black and white societies, and dealing with the repercussions of slavery. These situations are of the utmost concern for the Afro-American critics. While Euro-American critics also took up some of these issues, the Afro-American critics speak of them in more personal terms and at a different level of awareness. Morrison, as with most Afro-American writers, appeals to the "shared experiences" of Afro-Americans, and the Afro-American critics respond.

Some feminist critics included in their discussions the Euro-American values espoused by Morrison and "shared experiences" of Afro-Americans. But the primary concern of these critics is
Morrison's decrying of the thwarting of the personhood of women in American society. Some feminist critics feel that Morrison is concerned basically about black women, while others feel that she is concerned about all women. Without fail, the feminist critics discuss the almost superhuman strength of Morrison's women in their attempts to survive, as well as in their relationships with other women, children and even with men. Basically, the feminist critics respond to the rare, but abundant in Morrison's novels, positive images of women in literature.

However, Morrison feels that the critics have not adequately explained her works. In an interview in *Contemporary Literature* (Winter 1983), Morrison complains that:

Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write. Other kinds of structures are imposed on my work, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something that I have no interest in whatever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture.²

She feels that there is a void to be filled in the field of literary criticism. Morrison says:

My plea is for some pioneering work to be done in literary criticism, not just for my work, but for all sorts of people's work, and now that the literature exists, there can be that kind of criticism.³

Morrison may be correct in calling for more work in the area of literary criticism, but much work has been done, and some of the theories are just as relevant for her works as they are for all


³Ibid.
literature. In his book *A Short History of Literary Criticism*, Vernon Hall, Jr. states that, according to the Marxist theory of literature, all forms of literature "are produced by the same forces that produce social classes and cannot be fully understood without references to these forces." The three schools of critics that responded to Morrison's novels clearly represent social values. Therefore, inherent in the criticism of each school are the values of its tradition.

Finally, few writers are accorded the enormous success that Toni Morrison enjoys after a relatively short period of writing. The impressively large amount of criticism and the scholarly nature of the criticism hint at the importance of the books. Several critics feel that Morrison's works will "stand the test of time." The novels present society with messages, concerns and insights that are entertaining and refreshing, yet provocative. However, one must wonder if indeed Morrison's success is due, at least in part, to other factors yet to be discussed in the criticism. Perhaps, as the novels are examined further, this will be determined.

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