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2004

Toni Morrison: Playing in the Dark

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Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination

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Morrison, Toni
(1992)

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Domain: Race. Genre: Commentary / Criticism
(literary). Country: United States.

In 1990 Toni Morrison delivered the William E. Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization. The lecture series was revised and published in May 1992 as a slim volume titled *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. The three essays are

metacritical explorations into the operations of whiteness and blackness in the literature of white writers in the United States. Toni Morrison takes the position that the existing literary criticism in the United States has provided incomplete readings of its canonical literature and, further, has concealed the politics informing the practice of critical literary and cultural analysis itself. She points especially to the politics of the universal, which, as she presents it in *Playing in the Dark*, can easily be described as whiteness universalized, which situates whiteness as normative, unbiased, undifferentiated, always already legitimate, and thereby transcendent and timeless. Morrison's metacritical approach is one in which she examines both longstanding and contemporary practices in literary criticism in the United States and endeavours to demonstrate how those practices illuminate certain aspects of the literature while evading, in Morrison's view, a central aspect of it, "race" or what Toni Morrison terms an "Africanist Presence."

Toni Morrison began the public presentation of her metacritical investigation of the cultural workings of color in 1988 when she gave the Tanner Lecture on Human Values at the

University of Michigan. The lecture was later published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* as “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” and emphasizes the presence and power of blackness and the black body in Herman Melville’s writing. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison extends her earlier discussion by focusing on the meaning of the presence of the black body and of blackness in the literature of four white writers: Willa Cather’s *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not* (1937) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986). Throughout her readings of these narratives, Morrison critiques a metaphysics of color that she locates in these writers and in the literary canon of the United States which has traditionally been discussed as raceless and apolitical. Morrison asserts that attempts by critics to remove politics and race from intellectual and artistic discussions have cost literature its energy and life and that such attempts to remove these crucial issues from the discussion are, in effect, racist and political acts.

In chapter one of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison argues that a black presence pervades the United States and is crucial to shaping its national identity as well as to developing the nation's literature. Indeed, the actual black body or even imagined Africanisms—she speculates—may be the field on which, and quite often against which, characteristics (individualism, morality, innocence, among others) typically associated with the literature of the United States as well as with “Americanness” itself have been constructed. In this first section of her book, Toni Morrison shifts the emphasis of the discussion of race from the impact on those who suffer as a result of racialized narratives—literary, social, cultural, and political—to an emphasis on the impact of racialism on those who gain privilege and power under implicit as well as explicit racist discourses. Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* functions as Morrison's example of the intersections of power, race, sex, and gender, as Cather in this novel depicts the actions of a white woman who uses the black female body in order to gain power and a sense of identity.

In the second chapter of *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison discusses Edgar Allan Poe as an early

writer whose figurations of an Africanist Presence in the literature of the United States is central to our understanding of the concept of Africanism, a concept which locates the literature in dread, fear, and haunting rather than in the later prevailing social narrative of the United States that is located in optimism, confidence and newness. Also in her second chapter, Morrison discusses Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as a critique of the racist and classist pretensions of the antebellum United States and as a book in which an Africanist Presence is central. That critique, however, bears on Huck's (which is to say the writer Mark Twain's) inability to imagine freedom for Jim since freedom in the United States implies equality. In Morrison's reading of Mark Twain's satirical book, she finds that freedom from slavery for the black body must be accompanied by an acceptance of inferiority.

In Morrison's third and final chapter of *Playing in the Dark*, she insists that race as metaphor and metaphysics defines much of the literature of the United States as well as the nation's identity and should not be ignored in literary scholarship and intellectual discourse. She also asserts that "race" as a metaphor is

more dangerous than the Enlightenment concept of biological race. This danger arises from the ability one has to conceal class conflict and other social schisms or fears under the figure of “race.” Ernest Hemingway’s *To Have and to Have Not* and *The Garden of Eden* provide Morrison with an opportunity to discuss a writer whose use of the black body in literature is “unselfconscious”. Morrison locates two prevalent uses of an Africanist Presence in Hemingway’s narratives; 1) a black character that undermines the heroic figure’s suppositions of strength and power, and thereby produces fear and dread of the loss of power or of the truth of impotence 2) the black male character that takes on the role of the nurse, a part which in Hemingway’s writing is typically played by an accommodating and self-effacing woman. Morrison makes clear that she views the study of American Africanism as a project that is not interested in determining whether or not this body of literature or its writers are determinedly positioned in supremacist beliefs and the victimization of the black body; rather her interest is in how blackness and the black body have been and are used to speak the unspeakable about broader issues through the use of Africanism or “the fetishizing of color, the transference to

blackness of the power of illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire.”

Africanism in the literature of the United States, Morrison points out, is possible because the Enlightenment easily made a place for slavery by developing a hierarchy of race at the same time that it developed its theory of natural rights, thus in effect excluding black people from the rights of man. The social reality of blackness and slavery in the United States made a rich imaginative terrain on which white writers could play with blackness as both the “not-free” and the “not-me”. Morrison further points out that there is a European Africanism with its own shapes and dimensions which is located in colonial literature.

Morrison’s thinking-through of the operations of blackness and whiteness in the literature of the United States in *Playing in the Dark* followed her acclaim as the winner of two of the most prestigious literary prizes, the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize in literature, as well as the honour of having won or been nominated for every major US literary prize. In 1992, Toni Morrison had a

total of three books appear in print. In addition to *Playing in the Dark*, she published a collection of essays, *Race-ing Justice, Engendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*; her novel *Jazz* also was published in that year. Morrison's seminal book of literary criticism and theory has provided her with an additional achievement, as it was well-received by literary scholars and reviewers while also increasing interest in a field of intellectual inquiry that is currently termed whiteness studies. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* also found a place along with *Jazz* on the New York Times best sellers' list, placing Toni Morrison among the few writers to have two books on the list in different genres, and again confirming her admirable position as a literary and scholarly writer whose appeal reaches beyond university walls.

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First published 02 July 2004, last revised

2012-03-20

Citation: Jimoh, A Yemisi. "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 2 July 2004.

[<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=2769>, accessed 14 April 2012.]

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ISSN 1747-678X