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**Teaching Toni Morrison**

My life was never the same after reading *Beloved*. And I hope my students’ won’t be either.

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Every year, I get goosebumps. “Here is your copy of *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon* or *Home*,” I say to my high-school students. And in that moment I am struck again by my awesome and humbling role in this seemingly mundane ritual: My God, I’m the person—me—who gets to introduce a new generation of readers to the work of Toni Morrison. I feel the tremendous honor of my role, and the tremendous weight of that responsibility.

Teaching Toni Morrison to teenage readers is tough. Many students have a tendency to seek out familiar territory in the books they read. Who’s the good guy? Who’s the bad guy? How will this heroine triumph over this villain? What trials will she overcome before the final chapter ends? This is the unambiguous landscape of most young-adult literature.

But Toni Morrison denies her reader easy identifications and tidy resolutions. Instead she offers them irresolvable moral dilemmas and insoluble contradictions. A heroine can act with unfathomable cruelty. Has *Beloved*’s Sethe, in her brutal act, done the right thing? Morrison herself said she could not answer that question.

Morrison invites my students to observe the messy complexity of human experience, to hear African American voices in the literature classroom, voices long absent. For generations, teachers of literature presented students with the American experiences of Roderick Usher’s paranoia, Huckleberry Finn’s colloquialism, Jay Gatsby’s ambition, Holden Caulfield’s disenchantment. Morrison enables students today to hear the richness of black experience, the dignity and the pain of characters silenced or ignored by the white mainstream, characters who nonetheless lived vibrant lives of love and sorrow, characters like Pecola Breedlove, Sula Peace, or Macon Dead. In Morrison’s late novel *Home*, a black soldier returns to the United States after a psychologically devastating experience in the Korean War of the early 1950s. Back on American soil, he encounters police harassment, Jim Crow segregation, and medical experimentation conducted on unwitting black subjects. When interviewed, Morrison said that she wanted to pull the veil back from the rose-colored lens through which so many Americans see the 1950s. Their Golden Age, she said, was someone else’s hell.

In a few days my classroom will be full of students again, and piles of crisp new paperbacks await them: *Hamlet, The Catcher in the Rye, The Great Gatsby, Things Fall Apart, Beloved*.

Over the course of the year, students will highlight passages in those paperbacks, dog-ear their pages, and stuff them into already overstuffed backpacks. A rich world awaits their discovery—and in it a chance to discover themselves. My life was never the same after reading *Beloved*. And I hope theirs won’t be either.

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