

Name _____ Date _____

Toni Morrison

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. b'

Chloe Ardelia Wofford was born on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, a relatively racially integrated city in Ohio. Her parents instilled a love of reading, music, and African American folklore in her and her three siblings from a young age. When she was 12, she became Catholic and adopted the baptismal name Anthony, which led to the nickname Toni. Morrison graduated with honors from Lorain High School in 1949. She went on to attend Howard University, majoring in English and minoring in classics. Then she completed a master's degree in literature at Cornell.

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2. b'

Morrison became a college professor, teaching English at Texas Southern University and Howard University. She married Harold Morrison in 1958, and they had their first son, Harold Jr., three years later. The couple separated while she was pregnant with their second son, Slade. In 1965, Morrison moved with her sons to Syracuse, NY, to work as a textbook editor. She later moved to New York City to work in Random House's fiction department. Morrison was the publishing house's first Black female fiction editor and considered it her mission to elevate Black voices. She edited works by Black writers like Gayl Jones, Angela Davis, and Toni Cade Bambara. She edited Muhammad Ali's autobiography, The Greatest. She was especially proud of her work editing The Black Book, an acclaimed compilation of images and writings chronicling the Black experience in America.

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3. b'

After years of editing other writers' books, Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970, at the age of 39. The book follows a young Black girl who is discriminated against for her dark skin and yearns for blond hair and blue eyes. Morrison's second book was *Sula*, the story of two Black girls whose friendship changes throughout their lives. Her third novel, *Song of Solomon*, brought Morrison widespread acclaim. It was chosen as the main selection for the Book of the Month Club, making Morrison the first Black American female author to be selected. She also won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1978. At this point, Morrison still worked full-time as an editor at Random House. She wrote early in the morning, late at night, and while commuting.

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4. b'

Morrison put Black lives and experiences at the forefront of her work. She gave Black stories the fullness they so often lacked in Western literature. She rejected the idea that people are all one way or the other, and instead illustrated how every person possesses a complex spectrum of thoughts, morals, dreams, feelings, and beliefs.

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Morrison aimed to escape what she called the 'white gaze' or the need for approval from white society. She wanted to write to, for, and about Black people. At the same time, she examined themes that define what it means to be a human being. In *Sula*, Morrison wonders if race, class, gender, and upbringing define who we are and who we ultimately become. In *Beloved*, she asks what it means to live in the United States, with all of its successes and flaws. She includes mythical and supernatural phenomena in *Song of Solomon*, drawing from African American folk tales about flying. Morrison also explores the concepts of time and history. Her novels often veer back and forth in time instead of following a simple narrative. This way of writing mingles the past with the present. As Morrison said in an interview about *Beloved*, 'You can't let the past strangle you if you're going to move forward. But nevertheless, the past is not going anywhere.'

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Morrison received many accolades for her work throughout her life. She was appointed to the National Council on the Arts in 1980. In 1988, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Beloved*. In 1993, she won the Nobel Prize in Literature for her lifelong contributions to the field of writing. She was the first African American woman to be selected for the award. In 2012, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. Morrison also endured much criticism. Some reviewers acknowledged her great talent but believed she was limiting herself by writing only about Black people. Her books have been banned from some schools and libraries for her frank language and depictions of violence and sexuality. She fought against censorship, believing it was akin to the erasure of valuable perspectives.

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Toni Morrison died on August 5, 2019, in New York City. She leaves behind a legacy of brilliant storytelling and elevating the voices of underrepresented people.

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