Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination Study Guide

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination by Toni Morrison

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Toni Morrison's "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" is a collection of three essays written concerning race in American literature. orrison explores the ways that literary whiteness and literary blackness are constructed in American literature as well as the ways in which this affects American literature as a whole. "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" explores the means by which the African presence is used in American literature by different authors.

Toni Morrison's reading of "The Words to Say It" in 1983 sparks her interest in cataloging the way that black people ignite moments of discovery in literature not written by them. The main reason that these matters are so important to Morrison is because blackness and black people do not stimulate the same notions of dread, anarchy or love for her. As a black writer, she struggles with a language that evokes hidden signs of racial superiority. It is a common assumption that all readers of American literature are white, and Morrison wonders what such an assumption has meant to the literary imagination. She ponders how literary whiteness and blackness are made and what the consequences are of such a construction.

Toni Morrison argues for extending the study of American literature into a wider landscape. She is interested in what prompts and makes possible the process of entering into what one is estranged from. Her work requires her to think about how free she can be as an African-American female writer in a genderized, sexualized, racialized world. Morrison debates the assumption the American literature is free from and unshaped by the four hundred year presence of African-Americans in the United States, claiming that the contemplation of a black presence is central to understanding America's national literature. It is important to see how inextricable Africanism is in literary criticism, as well as to consider the strategies used to erase its presence from view. Silence and evasion rule the literary discourse on race. Morrison risks the accusations that she has a vested interest in the topics since the subject is far too important to be ignored. She analyzes Henry James' "What Maisie Knew" and Willa Cather's "Sapphira and the Slave Girl."

Toni Morrison cites examples from Edgar Allen Poe's "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" to support her theory that the white image is related to the erasure of the black figure. She also states that figurations of impenetrable whiteness surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged. In early America, the slave population offers itself up as surrogates for meditations on the problems of human freedom and terror. A major theme in American literature is the ways in which artists transfer their internal conflicts to a "blank darkness." Morrison takes from Bernard Bailyn's "Voyagers to the West" a succinct portrait of the process by which the American is established as new, white and male. The act of evading race in literature is a racist act in and of itself. The dark, abiding Africanist presence informs in American literature, hovering in the background as a shadow even when the literature is not about Africanist characters or idiom. Slave narratives are a publication boom in the nineteenth century as the question of freedom versus slavery rages. Africanism serves as a vehicle by

which the American self knows that it is not enslaved in works by writers such as Twain, Melville and Hawthorne. Morrison analyzes Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," as well as Edgar Allen Poe's work which she claims shows how the concept of the American self is similarly bound to Africanism though covert about its dependency. If one follows through with the self-reflexive natures of these encounters with Africanism, it reveals that the images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable. It reveals of the self-contradictory features of the self, while writers seem to say that whiteness alone is mute, veiled, senseless and implacable.

Toni Morrison claims that race is used metaphorically more now perhaps than ever before. Africanism acquiring a metaphysical necessity is not the same as losing its ideological utility. The presence of blacks is inherent and inextricable from the definition of American-ness. Morrison analyzes Hemingway's works and their distance from African-Americans, stating that his work is free of agenda and sensitivity, making it a pure case study for her theories. She investigates the use of a black crew member as nameless and stereotyped compared to named and personalized in "To Have and Have Not." Morrison explores Hemingway's use of the Africanist presence in male and female sexual relationships and discusses Hemingway's romantic attachment to nurses. In closing, Toni Morrison's deliberations about not about a particular author's attitudes toward race. Studies in American Africanism should investigate the ways that the Africanist presence and personae has been constructed and the literary uses it has served. Morrison's is not an investigation into racist or non-racist literature. She takes no position nor does she encourage one on the quality of a work based on an author's attitude toward race. Morrison's project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject. All of mankind is bereft when criticism is too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes.

Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

Toni Morrison's "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" is a collection of three essays written concerning race in American literature. Morrison explores the ways that literary whiteness and literary blackness are constructed in American literature as well as the ways in which this affects American literature as a whole. "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" explores the means by which the Africanist presence is used in American literature by different authors.

Persuaded by the title, Toni Morrison reads Marie Cardinal's "The Words to Say It" in 1983. The book is a document of the author's madness, therapy and healing. Morrison is skeptical of the book's classification as an autobiographical novel but finds the label to be accurate. She wonders when precisely Cardinal knew she was in trouble. Forty pages into the book "the Thing" that occurs when Cardinal attends a Louis Armstrong jazz concert is explained. The music tears at her nerves, she is gripped with panic, and she runs into the street like someone possessed. Morrison wonders what Louis Armstrong played that night to drive the sensitive, young girl hyperventilating into the street. This incident is crucial in Cardinal's therapy, but the imagery that serves as her catalyst goes unremarked upon. The narrator wonders if an Edith Piaf or Dvorak concert would have produced the same result and realizes that it is possible. The fact that solicits Morrison's attention is whether the cultural association with jazz is as important to Cardinal's possession as its intellectual foundations.

Morrison starts a file to document instances of black people igniting moments of discovery in literature not written by them. Louis Armstrong serves as Cardinal's catalyst and becomes an addition to Morrison's file. This causes Morrison to reflect on the consequences of jazz: the visceral, emotion and intellectual impact of those listening to jazz. A later luminous moment in Cardinal's novel is described, leading to the concept of black figuration as the author names the manifestation of her illness "the Thing." This moment occurs due to Cardinal's understanding that America plans to slaughter Algeria, Cardinal's real mother, and the accompanying pain of war in Algeria to a French girl born in Algeria. She sees the white slaughter of a black mother. As a white child growing up in Algeria, Cardinal is warned against relationships with Arabs other than distant and controlled relationships. Black people are seen as markers for the benevolent and wicked, the spiritual and voluptuous, and a sinful but enticing sensuality combined with demands for purity and restraint. One of Cardinal's first realizations in therapy concerns prepubescent sensuality, and she tells her doctor not to keep that gargoyle in his office.

Morrison's file grows with other examples of these narrative gearshifts elicited by a black presence in literature. The principle reason that this matters to Morrison is because for her, a black woman, blackness and black people do not stimulate the same notions of dread, anarchy or love. As a black writer, Morrison struggles with a language

that evokes hidden signals of racial superiority. Morrison's vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness. Reading and writing are not extremely distinct for a writer; they both require a certain alertness and awareness of the writer's notions about risk and safety, achievement of or the fight for meaning and responsibility. Morrison quotes Antonia S. Byatt in "Possession" about certain kinds of readings seeming inextricable from certain experiences of writing and the knowledge that others will read the writing differently runs ahead of any capacity to say what the author knows or how.

The fact that the imagination produces work implies that there is a shareable world and endlessly flexible language. Readers and writers struggle to interpret these imagined worlds. Until recently, Morrison assumes that all readers of American fiction are white, and the effect of this assumption on the literary imagination fascinates her. Morrison considers how literary whiteness and blackness are made and what the consequences are of such a construction. These matters challenge Morrison as a writer, making activities more difficult and more rewarding. The treasure trove of American literature amazes Morrison. "Playing in the Dark" is a result of the questions raised in three lectures given at Harvard by William E. Massey Sr., as well as the basis of the course in American Literature that Morrison teaches at Princeton. Morrison dedicates this work to her Princeton American Literature students, particularly Dwight McBride, Pamela Ali and Tara McGowan. She also thanks Peter Dimock for his help with the book.

Chapter 1: Black Matters

Chapter 1: Black Matters Summary and Analysis

The first chapter begins with a quote from T. S. Eliot's "Preludes IV" about being moved by fancies curled around the images of an infinitely gentle, infinitely suffering thing. Toni Morrison argues for extending the study of American literature into a wider landscape. She does not bring to this matter solely the tools of a literary critic; she is also a reader and a writer. Books reveal themselves differently to a writer. Morrison is interested in what prompts and makes possible the process of entering what one is estranged from. Her work requires her to consider how free she can be as an African-American female writer in a genderized, sexualized, racialized world; it also causes her to consider what happens to other writers working in the same world. Morrison's project arises out of delight in what she knows about the ways that writers transform aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, as well as the way that they tell stories.

Morrison debates the validity of the assumption that American literature is free from and unshaped by the four hundred year presence of African-Americans in the United States. Many assume that this presence has had no consequence in the origin and development of American literature. Morrison contemplates the idea that this black presence is central to understanding America's national literature and wonders if the characteristics of American literature are not a response to the Africanist presence in the country. The omissions, contradictions, conflicts and ways that authors people their work with it shows that the Africanist presence is crucial to their sense of being American. Morrison's curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this Africanist presence becomes a study, called American Africanism. She uses this term, Africanism, to mean the denotative and connotative blackness that the African people have come to signify, and she notes that this presence provides "a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and the problems as well as the blessings of freedom."

The United States is not unique in its construction of Africanism. This phenomenon leads Europeans to claim that racism is natural, but now their literature is subject to criticism concerning the racialized discourse present within. The United States' literature is not criticized thus. In America, the processing of organizing American unity through a distancing Africanism is the main means of creating a new cultural authority. Morrison does not want to replace the Eurocentric with an Afrocentric domination; her interest lies in what makes such domination possible and how agendas in criticism have disguised themselves and impoverished literature. She feels that it is important to recognize how inextricable the concept of Africanism is within literary criticism and to note the strategies used to hide its presence. By learning how Africanism functions in the literary imagination, Morrison believes it may be possible to discover the nature and cause of literary "whiteness." Silence and evasion rule literary discourse on race as a well-bred instinct argues that it is impolite to notice race, leading to the disregard of formerly well-regarded American writers and insights into their works.

A criticism written in 1936 of Edgar Allen Poe deems the term "darky" more acceptable than "nigger" but causes Toni Morrison to distrust this scholar. Studies of racism focus on the victims and the origin of racism, but it should also examine the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it. Morrison proposes to investigate the impact of racial hierarchy, exclusion, vulnerability and availability on the white people who held, resisted, explored or altered these racism notions. She wants to study the masters as well as the slaves. Others have begun to pose such questions in relation to various national literature, but it is important to do so with American literature as well. Morrison accepts the risk of accusations that she has a vested interest in the topic since she is African-American; she feels this subject is too important to be ignored. Many readers and critics do not read African-American texts, but Morrison is shocked by their ability to disregard the presence of black surrogacy in the literature that they do read. She lists Henry James' "What Maisie Knew," Gertrude Stein's "Three Lives" and Willa Cather's "Sapphira and the Slave Girl" as three explicit examples that contain such surrogacy that is impossible to inadvertently ignore. She also mentions that there are many such black references in Hemingway, Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor.

The disregard, or willed scholarly indifference, of this Africanist presence is parallel to the blindness to feminist discourse; however, now blatantly sexist writings are less common due to the successful appropriation by women of their own discourse. Early American literature's main concern is the architecture of a new white man. Writers themselves constitute the lasting resort to indifference of literary criticism concerning Africanism. Writers are the most sensitive, intellectually anarchic, representative and probing of all artists, and Toni Morrison looks to them for clarification about the invention and effects of Africanism in the United States. Morrison's early assumptions as a reader are that black people signify little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers which is reflected by the marginal impact blacks have on the lives of characters within a work as a result of the author's creative imagination. To write otherwise would be dishonest. When Morrison stops reading as a reader and begins to read as a writer, she observes how American literature behaves in its encounter with racial ideology and cannot help being shaped by the encounter with an Africanist presence. Morrison believes that it is important to consider how the Africanist presence enriches text in self-conscious ways and what this engagement means for the work of the writer's imagination. She ponders how literary utterance arranges itself when trying to imagine an Africanist other. As a reader, she assumes nothing happens, but as a writer, she sees that "the subject of the dream is the dreamer."

The fabrication of an Africanist presence is a reflexive meditation on the self. It is as if one looks in a fishbowl and sees what is inside without seeing the invisible structure that permits the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world. Similarly, the way Americans talk about themselves through and within allegorical and metaphorical, choked representation of the Africanist presence becomes transparent. One example is the willful critical blindness in studies concerning Willa Cather's "Sapphira and the Slave Girl." References to the novel are generally apologetic, dismissive or cutting, but they do not acknowledge why the novel is considered a failure. Morrison suspects the problem exists in coming to terms with the novel's concerns: the power and license of a white slave mistress over her female slaves. This topic will not allow readers to ignore race.

The first hint of this problem lies in the title; the "slave girl" has a name, Nancy, but she cannot be named within the title because such would present a situation of racial equality. Morrison summarizes the novel. Sapphira, the mistress, is jealous of her slave Nancy because she suspects her husband is sexually interested in the girl. She plots to have her nephew, Martin, rape Nancy, but Rachel, Sapphira's daughter, intervenes and saves Nancy. The novel is very complex and has many problems with its execution which result from Cather's struggle to address the almost completely buried subject of the interdependence of power, race and sexuality in a white woman's battle for coherence. The novel is a classic fugitive slave narrative, but the white slave mistress is the real fugitive. Till, Nancy's mother, has no maternal instincts which is based on the assumption that slave women are not real mothers. Therefore, it is unnatural and shocking when Till inquires about her daughter after Nancy's escape. This lack of maternal love and an absence of camaraderie between Nancy and the other slave women results from Nancy's lighter skin color.

The racial component of Nancy's attempted rape makes the story interesting because she has no one to turn to for protection, not even the law. Sapphira's plotting is pointless because Mr. Colbert, her husband, would not be discouraged by the fact that Nancy is unchaste if she were raped. In "Sapphira and the Slave Girl," Cather inquires into the reckless, unabated power of a white woman gathering her identity from the wholly available and serviceable lives of Africanist others, raising a moral debate. The story is of a desperate mistress whose social pedestal rests on the spine of racial degradation. The novel would be meaningless without the Africanist characters and their condition as slaves. The novel itself appears as the final fugitive in conjunction with Cather's other novels. It functions as a means to meditate on the moral equivalence of free white women and enslaved black women. The mother/daughter relationships show that Cather uses her novel to re-dream her problematic relationship with her own mother, using the land of fictional memoir. Cather employs surrogate Africanist characters to explore her own desire for a safe participation in loss, love, chaos and justice. Her characters make claims, though, which urge Cather to place Till and Nancy at the most prominent position in the novel. Willa Cather works out and toward the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism, and though she may not arrive, at least she attempts the dangerous journey.

Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow

Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow Summary and Analysis

The second chapter begins with a quote by Robert Penn Warren's "Penological Studies: Southern Exposure" about "shadows bigger than people and blacker than niggers." In "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," Edgar Allen Poe describes the last two days of the characters' journey, the narrative ending after the black man dies and the white shadows rise up. Toni Morrison considers Poe the most important early American writer in regards to the concept of American Africanism. The white image is related to the erasure of the black figure; figurations of impenetrable whiteness occur with representations of dead, impotent or controlled Africanist characters, functioning as an antidote and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness. This haunting suggests the complex and contradictory situation of early American writers.

Early America distinguishes itself by pressing toward a future of freedom. The flight from the Old World to the New World is portrayed as an escape from oppression, but it was also an escape from license and depravity. The New World provides a new setting and a fresh chance for settlers. The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries present the option of gaining power in America. Early American literature shows the fears, forces and hopes that present a striking image of how troubled early American literature is despite the fact that people make much of the potential, freedom and innocence. There is a strong affinity between the nineteenth century American psyche and gothic romance; this results, at least in part, because one way to benefit from past mistakes is to record them in order to avoid repetition in the future. This usually occurs through the form of romance, and many suggest that romance serves as a means to evade history; however, Morrison sees romance as an exploration of the anxiety which makes the safe and risky embrace of quite specific, human fears possible. Such a fear is the terror of freedom though it is the thing coveted most of all. Romance offers a platform for moralizing and fabrication, and Herman Melville points out that no romance exists free from the "powers of blackness," especially in a country with a resident black population upon which the imagination can play. America's slave population offers itself up as surrogates for meditations on the problems of human freedom and terror.

A major theme in American literature is the ways that artists transfer internal conflicts to a "blank darkness." Slavery highlights freedom while enriching the country's creative possibilities due to the polarity of skin color and the projection of difference. Morrison examines how the image of a bound and suppressed darkness becomes objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona. She wants to show how the duties of persona (exorcism, reification and mirroring) are on demand and displayed throughout much of American literature, helping to form the distinguishing characteristics of American literature. The mind of American literature is preoccupied with the highly problematic construction of the American as a new, white man. There is a conscious

necessity for establishing a theatrical difference which allows writers to celebrate or deplore the identity already existing or rapidly taking form as a result of the elaboration of racial difference. This difference provides a huge payout of sign, symbol and agency in the process of organizing, separating and consolidating identity along culturally valuable lines of interest.

Bernard Bailyn's "Voyagers to the West" provides an investigation of European settlers' act of becoming Americans; this investigation underscores the salient aspects of an American character. A well-educated Scotsman, William Dunbar claims land in Mississippi and later appears in Philadelphia in 1771. In July 1776, he writes about the suppression of his slaves' alleged conspiracy for freedom from his plantation. His plantation regime is mild by the standards of the time. William Dunbar's finer sensibilities are dulled by the abrasions of frontier life, and he emerges a new man, a man of property in the raw, half-savage world. The connection between Dunbar's education and his New World enterprise demonstrates the alliance between the Enlightenment and the institution of slavery. Dunbar is strangely insensitive to his slaves' suffering which Morrison takes as a succinct portrait of the process by which the American as new, white and male is constituted. Dunbar experiences a sense of freedom and power he has never known before through his absolute control over the lives of others. Savagery serves as a background for this transformation, and these concerns (autonomy, authority, newness, difference and absolute power) become the themes and presumptions of American literature. This is also made possible by, shaped by and activated by an awareness of Africanism deployed as rawness and savagery. All others made possible by absolute power which is played against the natural and mental landscape that is conceived of as a raw, half-savage world. This world is seen as raw and savage due to having access to an enslaved, black population against which whites can measure their privileges. This individualism fuses with the prototype of Americans as solitary, alienated and malcontent, due to the Africanist population. The white male justifies giving his slaves lashes; this is not evidence of his own savagery but confirmation of black irrationality due to their attempts at escape. These contradictions appear continually in American literature.

The act of ignoring race in literature is a racist act in itself. The dark, abiding Africanist presence informs in American literature, hovering in the background as a shadow even when the literature is not about Africanist characters or idiom. American cannot exist without this Africanist presence; the term "American" is associated with race because it assumes white American unless specified otherwise. For early American writers, the Africanist other becomes a means of thinking about kindness, love, restraint, freedom, aggression, ethics, morality, religion and power. There are a number of items cataloged in the formation of the American character and production of the national literature; this must include an Africanist presence. The need to establish a difference stems from the New World and its claim to freedom along with the presence of the enslaved in the democratic experiment. The distinguishing features of non-Americans are their slave status, social status and color. Color has significance due to the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances, leading to the social and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed in American literature.

Artists, especially writers, respond to culture. Nineteenth century writers are mindful of the Africanist presence and address their views in their works. Slave narratives are a publication boom as the question of freedom compared to slavery rages. It is impossible to speak of political concerns with referring to Africans. The consequence is a master narrative that speaks for and of Africans and is able to make adjustments in order to keep itself intact. Silence about the subject is common, and Morrison is interested in the strategies for maintaining and breaking the silence. The Africanist character serves as a surrogate and enabler. Africanism is used to conduct a dialogue about American space in Poe's "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym." Africanism serves as a vehicle for regulating love as well as defenses against guilt and despair. Africanism is a way that the American self knows that it is not enslaved, such as in Twain, Melville and Hawthorne. It is important to study the ways that the Africanist idiom is used to establish difference or signal modernity as well as the technical ways that the Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce inventions and implications of whiteness. Morrison sees a need to analyze the manipulation of the Africanist narrative as a means of meditation on one's own humanity. These topics surface endlessly; two examples are in Poe and Twain's "Huckleberry Finn."

Supplementing a reader of "Huckleberry Finn" to incorporate a critique of antebellum America produces a fuller novel, critiquing class and race. Early criticism misses or dismisses the social quarrel in "Huckleberry Finn" because it appears to assimilate the ideological assumptions of society and culture. Jim serves as an agency for Huck's struggle during the many controversies about the close examination of the interdependence of slavery and freedom. The critical controversy focuses on the collapse of the so-called fatal ending of the novel, but letting Jim go free would be to abandon the entire premise of "Huckleberry Finn." The fatal ending becomes a deferment of Jim's escape because freedom has no meaning to Huck. The novel addresses the slave's body and personality. Two things that strike the reader are the love and compassion that the black man has for his white friend and master, and the assumption that whites are superior and adult (as they claim). Twain's representation of Jim shows a yearning for forgiveness and love from whites which is only possible because Jim recognizes his inferiority and despises it. Jim permits these torments and humiliation, responding only with love, but this would be impossible if Jim were a white character. It is not what Jim wants that warrants inquiry but what Twain, Huck and Tom need from Jim that should solicit the readers' attention. The book simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom.

Poe's works show how the concept of the American self is similarly bound to Africanism but covert about its dependency. Poe has a desperate need and pretensions to the planter class which provides samples for the literary technique of "othering," especially in "The Gold-Bug" and "How to Write a Blackwood Article," through estranging language and stereotyping, among other things. There are some unmanageable slips throughout Poe's work, such as Jupiter, the slave, whipping his master in "The Gold-Bug," Pompey judging his mistress mutely in "A Blackwood Article," and Pym engaging in cannibalism before meeting the black savages. These remind Morrison of other images at the end of literary journeys into the forbidden space of blackness: Faulkner's "Absalom! Absalom!," Hemingway's "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," William Styron's "To Have and Have Not,"

and Sam Bellow's "Henderson the Rain King." If one follows through with the self-reflexive natures of these encounters with Africanism, it reveals that the images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable. It reveals of the self-contradictory features of the self, while writers seem to say that whiteness alone is mute, veiled, senseless and implacable.

Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks

Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks Summary and Analysis

In the third chapter, Toni Morrison opens with a quote by William Carlos Williams' "Adam" about the special hell where black women wait for boys. Race is used metaphorically more now perhaps than ever before. The metaphorical and metaphysical uses of race occupy definitive place in American literature and should be a major concern of the literary scholarship that tries to know it. Morrison wishes to trace the transformation of American Africanism from the simplistic purpose of establishing hierarchical differences to its surrogate properties as self-reflexive meditations on the loss of a difference to the existence in rhetoric of dread and desire. Africanism acquiring a metaphysical necessity is not the same as losing its ideological utility which is still intact. A common claim is that white America has considered morality, ethics, supremacy of mind, vulnerability of body, blessings and liabilities of progress and modernity without reference to the situation of the black population. All public discourse references the existence of black people, from the Constitution, the public school system and the legal system. The presence of blacks is inherent and inextricable from the definition of Americanness.

Like in history, American literature represents a commentary on the transformations of racial difference. The literature also has an additional concern: the imagination interacting with the world. The linguistic responses to the Africanist presence complicate texts. Morrison quotes James Snead's book on Faulkner, commenting that racial divisions "show their flaws best in written form" and breaking down the points of the quote. The common linguistic strategies employed in fiction to engage the serious consequences of blacks are listed as economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory and patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language. Hemingway's work is distanced from African-Americans; there is no need, desire or awareness of them except in his imaginative world, making Hemingway's work more artless and unselfconscious than Poe where social unease requires blacks in his works.

Hemingway's work is free of an agenda and sensitivity, providing a pure case study of the effects of the Africanist presence to use to test Morrison's theories. In "To Have and Have Not," Harry Morgan is knowing, virile, free, brave and moral. Harry includes an unnamed "nigger" in his crew. The first part of the novel is scene through Harry's first person point of view and discusses this nameless "nigger" as such. In the second part, the omniscient third person narrator refers to this crew member by name, "Wesley" when Harry talks to him while the narrator continues to refer to the "nigger" who is silent, his speech only serving Harry's needs. Enforcing this silence of the "nigger"

becomes problematic for Hemingway. Wesley steers the vessel as Harry coaches Johnson, and Hemingway is forced into a syntactic improbability to maintain Wesley's silence. Genderizing and humanizing Wesley at the beginning of the novel would position Harry differently and compare him to the alcoholic, Eddy. Violence is stressed in the novel, such as in the shooting outside of the café. The Cubans are separated by color, not nationality. The blacks are portrayed as the most violence. In the second part, Harry and Wesley talk, but Wesley's speech is simply grumbles, complaints and apologies for weakness. Harry and Wesley are both shot, but Wesley complains more even though Harry is shot worse. Harry uses "Wesley" to avoid offending others and losing the claim to his compassionate nature. Harry uses "nigger" in direct dialogue after Wesley admits his inferiority. Wesley criticizes Harry between grumbling and apologizing, showing another, inhuman Harry.

The serviceability of the Africanist presence is more pronounced when Hemingway describes the relationships between males and females. The last voice in the novel is Harry's wife, Marie, praising her dead husband. Marie sees Harry's brutality and power as sexually attractive. Marie thinks about her hatred of the Cubans who killed Harry, recalling a trip she and Harry took to Cuba when she was twenty-six when a black man "said something" to her at the park. Harry smacks the black man and throws his hat in the street. This leads to Marie dying her hair blonde for the first time. It is not about what the black man said so much as that he dared to speak to a white woman, something seen as a sign of disrespect. Marie dyes her hair lighter to establish a difference between herself and the blacks. Her reaction is sensual, even sexual, and Harry finds Marie's lighter hair beautiful and more sexual. The tourists in Havana have a privileged status compared to the natives because the tourists are white. The black man represents an outlaw sexuality. Africanism is used not only as a means of displaying authority but as its source. These strategies become more sophisticated in "The Garden of Eden" where Africanism provides a field for the novel that works out the terms and maps out the complete aesthetics.

Hemingway is romantically attached to nurses in the form of a caretaker of some sort. Many women in Hemingway's works become objects of desire because of their nurse-like characteristics. Hemingway also uses males in this capacity; these nurse-men are usually black men with disability properties along with their enabling ones, such as Sam in "The Killers," Wesley in "To Have and Have Not" and Bugs in "The Battler." Whether nourishing and/or bashing their master's body, these black nurse-men articulate the narrator's doom and alter his self-image. Another side of these nurses is the figure of destruction, a devouring predator whose inhuman and indifferent impulses pose an immediate danger. Such properties are given to women. Female nurses complete acts of destruction, combining signs of the nurse with those of a shark. Harry and Marie discuss sex with black women which Harry compares to having sex with a "nurse shark," something far from human. This comforts and amuses Marie. There is no evidence that Hemingway shares Harry's viewpoint about black women.

In "The Garden of Eden," Catherine desires to be tan, showing an understanding of the social taboo of blackness associated with strangeness. Catherine also dyes her hair blonde. These coloring gestures excite her husband, David, which is furthered by the

incestuous brother and sister emphasis. The disapproval of this incest is reinforced by references to the devil and night things. David also tans and bleaches his hair. Catherine eventually stops tanning because she is "naturally dark." Catherine is male and female, white and black, and she descends into madness when Marita, the real nurse, appears. Marita is naturally dark which is compared to Catherine's bleached hair which Hemingway refers to as "dark magic." Catherine desires to be David's "African girl." To David, Africa is an uncreated void offering itself up for his imagination and work. At the heart of the story, David is writing "Eden," a story about his adventures in Africa. The inner tale shows an innocent, white-controlled Africa while the outer story shows an evil and chaotic Africanism. Catherine destroys and burns the inner story which shows white domination and slaughter with African servants who share David's "guilt and knowledge." The outer story comments on the aesthetic and mythological blackness. Both are pulled from fields of desire and need which are enabled by a discursive Africanism at the author's disposal.

In closing, Toni Morrison's deliberations about not about a particular author's attitudes toward race. Studies in American Africanism should investigate the ways that the Africanist presence and personae has been constructed and the literary uses it has served. Morrison's is not an investigation into racist or non-racist literature. She takes no position nor does she encourage one on the quality of a work based on an author's attitude toward race. Morrison's project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject. All of mankind is bereft when criticism is too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes.

Characters

Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison is the author of "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," as well as the voice of the narrator. Toni Morrison's reading of "The Words to Say It" in 1983 sparks her interest in cataloging the way that black people ignite moments of discovery in literature not written by them. The main reason that these matters are so important to Morrison is because blackness and black people do not stimulate the same notions of dread, anarchy or love for her. As a black writer, she struggles with a language that evokes hidden signs of racial superiority. It is a common assumption that all readers of American literature are white, and Morrison wonders what such an assumption has meant to the literary imagination. She ponders how literary whiteness and blackness are made and what the consequences are of such a construction. Toni Morrison argues for extending the study of American literature into a wider landscape. She is interested in what prompts and makes possible the process of entering into what one is estranged from. Her work requires her to think about how free she can be as an African-American female writer in a genderized, sexualized, racialized world. Morrison debates the assumption the American literature is free from and unshaped by the four hundred year presence of African-Americans in the United States, claiming that the contemplation of a black presence is central to understanding America's national literature. Morrison risks the accusations that she has a vested interest in the topics since the subject is far too important to be ignored. She analyzes Henry James' "What Maisie Knew" and Willa Cather's "Sapphira and the Slave Girl."

Toni Morrison cites examples from Edgar Allen Poe's "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" to support her theory that the white image is related to the erasure of the black figure. She also states that figurations of impenetrable whiteness surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged. Morrison takes from Bernard Bailyn's "Voyagers to the West" a succinct portrait of the process by which the American is established as new, white and male. Morrison analyzes Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn," as well as Edgar Allen Poe's work which she claims shows how the concept of the American self is similarly bound to Africanism though covert about its dependency. Morrison suggests that if one follows through with the self-reflexive natures of these encounters with Africanism, it reveals that the images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable. It reveals of the self-contradictory features of the self, while writers seem to say that whiteness alone is mute, veiled, senseless and implacable.

Toni Morrison claims that race is used metaphorically more now perhaps than ever before. Morrison analyzes Hemingway's works and their distance from African-Americans, stating that his work is free of agenda and sensitivity, making it a pure case study for her theories. She investigates the use of a black crew member as nameless and stereotyped compared to named and personalized in "To Have and Have Not." Morrison explores Hemingway's use of the Africanist presence in male and female

sexual relationships and discusses Hemingway's romantic attachment to nurses. In closing, Toni Morrison's deliberations about not about a particular author's attitudes toward race. Studies in American Africanism should investigate the ways that the Africanist presence and personae has been constructed and the literary uses it has served. Morrison's is not an investigation into racist or non-racist literature. She takes no position nor does she encourage one on the quality of a work based on an author's attitude toward race. Morrison's project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject. All of mankind is bereft when criticism is too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes.

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway is the author of "To Have and Have Not" and "Garden of Eden," both of which Toni Morrison analyzes closely in this novel. Hemingway's work is free of the nineteenth century ideological agenda and postmodernist sensitivity which makes it an idea case study with which to test Morrison's theories. Hemingway frequently uses the Africanist presence in his writings, such as when he carefully structures the use of the naming process in "To Have and Have Not" between Wesley and "nigger." The serviceability of the Africanist presence is more pronounced in Hemingway's portrayal of male and female relationships.

Hemingway uses Africanism as a fundamental fictional technique with which to establish character. Hemingway's romantic attachment to nurses is evident in his repetitive use of nurses or those with nurturing characteristics as the love interest in his stories, though some women are seen as nurse sharks that devour those they are supposed to be nursing. He also uses black men as nurse-men who care for his protagonists without emasculating them. Hemingway enforces the illegality of incest by associating it with darkness, desire, irrationality and evil. He describes hair bleaching as "dark magic." Morrison does not invest Hemingway with his characters' opinions.

Marie Cardinal

Marie Cardinal is the author of "The Words to Say It," an autobiographical novel about her battle with mental illness. She writes several books, wins the Prix International, teaches philosophy, and admits that she always planned to write about her journey into health. Marie Cardinal's first anxiety attack, which she names "the Thing," is triggered by a Louis Armstrong concert. Cardinal is a French girl born in Algeria and is pained by the white slaughter of a black mother during the war with Algeria. Cardinal's novel begins Morrison's file of blacks affecting literature that is not about or by them.

Edgar Allen Poe

Edgar Allen Poe is the author of "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," "The Gold-Bug," and "How to Write a Blackwood Article." Morrison considers him the most important early American writer to the concept of American Africanism. Poe's writing contains

samples of figurations of impenetrable whiteness. His writing demonstrates how the concept of the American self is bound to Africanism and is covert about its dependency.

Henry James

Henry James is the author of "What Maisie Knew" which uses the black woman to lubricate the plot and become the agency of moral choice and meaning.

Willa Cather

Willa Cather is the author of "Sapphira and the Slave Girl." Her rendering of black characters tend to be overlooked as scholarship ignores the racial concepts. Cather's writing recreates her troubled relationship with her mother.

Writers

According to Morrison, writers are "among the most sensitive, most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power." She also refers to writers as the creators of American literature.

William Dunbar

William Dunbar is mentioned by Bernard Bailyn in "Voyagers to the West." He is a Scottist scientist who claims land in Mississippi. He writes to complain about his slaves' rebellion in July 1776. Dunbar's finer sensibilities are dulled by frontier life, and he emerges a distinctive new man.

Bernard Bailyn

Bernard Bailyn is the author of "Voyagers to the West," an extraordinary investigation of European settlers in the act of becoming American. His book defines the new man.

James Snead

James Snead is the author of "Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels." He claims that racial divisions "show their flaws best in written form."

William Faulkner

William Faulkner counters social figures with literary devices of his own. According to James Snead's "Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels," Faulkner's

devices include the economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory and patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language.

Objects/Places

The Words to Say It

"The Words to Say It" is written by Marie Cardinal, and Toni Morrison reads it in 1983. It is a documentation of Cardinal's madness, which takes the form of an anxiety attack of sorts. It is an autobiographical novel. This book leads Morrison to consider how blacks affect literature not written by or about them, causing her to start a file of such instances.

American Literature

A common assumption is that American literature is not shaped by the Africanist presence in the United States; however, Morrison shows that early American literature does reflect the Africanist presence though written by white males.

Africanist Presence

The Africanist presence in American literature is a reflection of the black population in the United States. This presence appears explicitly or implicitly in all American literature. Toni Morrison investigates this presence which she defines as the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify as well as the entire "range of views, assumptions, readings and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning" about these people.

Black Surrogacy

Black surrogacy is an informing, stabilizing and disturbing element which shows that Africanism is inherent and implicit in American literature.

What Maisie Knew

"What Maisie Knew" is written by Henry James. Criticism about this book ignores the black women in it who lubricates the turn of the plot and becomes the agency of moral choice and meaning.

Sapphira and the Slave Girl

"Sapphira and the Slave Girl" is written by Willa Cather. In this novel, race causes a problem in the technique and credibility. The novel's concern focuses on the absolute power and license of a white slave mistress over the bodies of her female slaves.

White Images

White images are figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged. These usually appear at the end of the narrative, functioning as an antidote for and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness.

Power of Blackness

The power of blackness refers to the slave population that offers itself up as surrogates for meditations on freedom and terror. According to Herman Melville, no romance is free from this power of blackness.

Huckleberry Finn

"Huckleberry Finn" is written by Mark Twain. Morrison investigates Jim as a representation of racial dissent. The fatal ending collapses because Jim cannot go free since Huck does not understand the value of freedom.

Romance

Romance is the form in which this uniquely American prophylaxis is played out. Critics suggest that romance is an evasion of history, but Morrison believes that romance is an exploration of the anxiety which makes possible the embrace of human fears.

Voyagers to the West

"Voyagers to the West" by Bernard Bailyn is an investigation of the European settlers' actions in becoming American. The passage that Morrison focuses on is about William Dunbar and underscores the salient aspects of the American character.

New Man

The new man is described in "Voyagers to the West" which sets up the American as new, white and male. This has a background of savagery and a sense of authority and autonomy as the result of the new man's control over others' lives.

Raw, Half-Savage World

The raw, half-savage world is the natural and mental landscape that makes the new man possible. The world is seen as raw and savage because of the bound, black population against which whites can measure their privileged status.

To Have and Have Not

"To Have and Have Not" is written by Ernest Hemingway. It is intentionally political and contains two parts, one of which shows the nameless, stereotyped black man while the other shows a named and personalized black man, Wesley.

Nurses and Nurse Men

Hemingway uses characters with nurse-like characteristics to care for his protagonists without undermining their masculinity. The nurse men are usually dedicated and thoughtful black men.

Americanization

Americanization is described as the "Americanness" which whites understand as an opposition to the resident black population and which allows the term American to refer to white Americans.

Themes

Concepts of Africanism in American Literature

The most pronounced theme throughout Toni Morrison's "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" is an exploration of the recurring concepts of Africanism in American literature. Morrison starts a file to document instances of black people igniting moments of discovery in literature not written by them. Black people are seen as markers for the benevolent and wicked, the spiritual and voluptuous, and a sinful but enticing sensuality combined with demands for purity and restraint. As a black writer, Morrison struggles with a language that evokes hidden signals of racial superiority. Morrison's vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness. Until recently, Morrison assumes that all readers of American fiction are white, and the effect of this assumption on the literary imagination fascinates her. Morrison considers how literary whiteness and blackness are made and what the consequences are of such a construction. Morrison debates the validity of the assumption that American literature is free from and unshaped by the four hundred year presence of African-Americans in the United States. Many assume that this presence has had no consequence in the origin and development of American literature. Morrison contemplates the idea that this black presence is central to understanding America's national literature and wonders if the characteristics of American literature are not a response to the Africanist presence in the country. The omissions, contradictions, conflicts and ways that authors people their work with it shows that the Africanist presence is crucial to their sense of being American. Morrison's curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this Africanist presence becomes a study, called American Africanism. She uses this term, Africanism, to mean the denotative and connotative blackness that the African people have come to signify, and she notes that this presence provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and the problems as well as the blessings of freedom.

In America, the processing of organizing American unity through a distancing Africanism is the main means of creating a new cultural authority. Morrison feels that it is important to recognize how inextricable the concept of Africanism is within literary criticism and to note the strategies used to hide its presence. By learning how Africanism functions in the literary imagination, Morrison believes it may be possible to discover the nature and cause of literary "whiteness." Many readers and critics do not read African-American texts, but Morrison is shocked by their ability to disregard the presence of black surrogacy in the literature that they do read. She lists Henry James' "What Maisie Knew," Gertrude Stein's "Three Lives" and Willa Cather's "Sapphira and the Slave Girl" as three explicit examples that contain such surrogacy that is impossible to inadvertently ignore. She also mentions that there are many such black references in Hemingway, Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor. Toni Morrison looks to other writers for clarification about the invention and effects of Africanism in the United States. Morrison's early assumptions as a reader are that black people signify little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers which is reflected by the marginal impact blacks have on the lives of characters within a work as a result of the author's creative

imagination. She ponders how the literary utterance arranges itself when trying to imagine an Africanist other. The fabrication of an Africanist presence is a reflexive meditation on the self. The way Americans talk about themselves through and within allegorical and metaphorical, choked representation of the Africanist presence becomes transparent.

The white image is related to the erasure of the black figure; figurations of impenetrable whiteness occur with representations of dead, impotent or controlled Africanist characters, functioning as an antidote and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness. A major theme in American literature is the ways that artists transfer internal conflicts to a "blank darkness." Slavery highlights freedom while enriching the country's creative possibilities due to the polarity of skin color and the projection of difference. Morrison examines how the image of a bound and suppressed darkness becomes objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona. She wants to show how the duties of persona (exorcism, reification and mirroring) are on demand and displayed throughout much of American literature, helping to form the distinguishing characteristics of American literature. The act of ignoring race in literature is a racist act in itself. The dark, abiding Africanist presence informs in American literature, hovering in the background as a shadow even when the literature is not about Africanist characters or idiom. American cannot exist without this Africanist presence; the term "American" is associated with race because it assumes white American unless specified otherwise. For early American writers, the Africanist other becomes a means of thinking about kindness, love, restraint, freedom, aggression, ethics, morality, religion and power. Poe's works show how the concept of the American self is similarly bound to Africanism but covert about its dependency. Poe has a desperate need and pretensions to the planter class which provides samples for the literary technique of "othering," especially in "The Gold-Bug" and "How to Write a Blackwood Article," through estranging language and stereotyping, among other things. If one follows through with the self-reflexive natures of these encounters with Africanism, it reveals that the images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable. It reveals of the self-contradictory features of the self, while writers seem to say that whiteness alone is mute, veiled, senseless and implacable.

Morrison wishes to trace the transformation of American Africanism from the simplistic purpose of establishing hierarchical differences to its surrogate properties as self-reflexive meditations on the loss of a difference to the existence in rhetoric of dread and desire. Africanism acquiring a metaphysical necessity is not the same as losing its ideological utility which is still intact. The linguistic responses to the Africanist presence complicate texts. The common linguistic strategies employed in fiction to engage the serious consequences of blacks are listed as economy of stereotype, metonymic displacement, metaphysical condensation, fetishization, dehistoricizing allegory and patterns of explosive, disjointed, repetitive language. Hemingway's work is distanced from African-Americans; there is no need, desire or awareness of them except in his imaginative world, making Hemingway's work more artless and unselfconscious than Poe where social unease requires blacks in his works. Hemingway's work is free of an agenda and sensitivity, providing a pure case study of the effects of the Africanist presence to use to test Morrison's theories. Studies in American Africanism should

investigate the ways that the Africanist presence and persona has been constructed and the literary uses it has served. Morrison's is not an investigation into racist or non-racist literature. She takes no position nor does she encourage one on the quality of a work based on an author's attitude toward race. Morrison's project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject. All of mankind is bereft when criticism is too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes.

Means of Establishing Whiteness in American Literature

A recurring theme in Toni Morrison's "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" is the means of establishing whiteness as a prerequisite in American literature. Until recently, Morrison assumes that all readers of American fiction are white, and the effect of this assumption on the literary imagination fascinates her. Morrison considers how literary whiteness and blackness are made and what the consequences are of such a construction. Morrison debates the validity of the assumption that American literature is free from and unshaped by the four hundred year presence of African-Americans in the United States. Many assume that this presence has had no consequence in the origin and development of American literature. By learning how Africanism functions in the literary imagination, Morrison believes it may be possible to discover the nature and cause of literary "whiteness." In "Sapphira and the Slave Girl", the real fugitive is the white slave mistress, and the novel functions as a means of meditating on the moral equivalence of free white women and enslaved black woman.

In "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym," Edgar Allen Poe describes the last two days of the characters' journey, the narrative ending after the black man dies and the white shadows rise up. The white image is related to the erasure of the black figure; figurations of impenetrable whiteness occur with representations of dead, impotent or controlled Africanist characters, functioning as an antidote and meditation on the shadow that is companion to this whiteness. Bernard Bailyn's "Voyagers to the West" provides an investigation of European settlers' act of becoming Americans; this investigation underscores the salient aspects of an American character which Morrison takes as a succinct portrait of the process by which the American as new, white and male is constituted. Savagery serves as a background for this transformation, and these concerns (autonomy, authority, newness, difference and absolute power) become the themes and presumptions of American literature. All others are made possible by absolute power which is played against the natural and mental landscape that is conceived of as a raw, half-savage world. This world is seen as raw and savage due to having access to an enslaved, black population against which whites can measure their privileges. It is important to study the ways that the Africanist idiom is used to establish difference or signal modernity as well as the technical ways that the Africanist character is used to limn out and enforce inventions and implications of whiteness. "Huckleberry Finn" simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom.

Supplementing a reader of "Huckleberry Finn" to incorporate a critique of antebellum America produces a fuller novel, critiquing class and race. Early criticism misses or

dismisses the social quarrel in "Huckleberry Finn" because it appears to assimilate the ideological assumptions of society and culture. Jim serves as an agency for Huck's struggle during the many controversies about the close examination of the interdependence of slavery and freedom. The critical controversy focuses on the collapse of the so-called fatal ending of the novel, but letting Jim go free would be to abandon the entire premise of "Huckleberry Finn." The fatal ending becomes a deferment of Jim's escape because freedom has no meaning to Huck. The novel addresses the slave's body and personality. Two things that strike the reader are the love and compassion that the black man has for his white friend and master, and the assumption that whites are superior and adult (as they claim). Twain's representation of Jim shows a yearning for forgiveness and love from whites which is only possible because Jim recognizes his inferiority and despises it. Jim permits these torments and humiliation, responding only with love, but this would be impossible if Jim were a white character. It is not what Jim wants that warrants inquiry but what Twain, Huck and Tom need from Jim that should solicit the readers' attention. The book simulates and describes the parasitical nature of white freedom. Images of blackness reveal all of the self-contradictory features of the self, while writers seem to say that whiteness alone is mute, veiled, senseless and implacable.

A common claim is that white America has considered morality, ethics, supremacy of mind, vulnerability of body, blessings and liabilities of progress and modernity without reference to the situation of the black population. In "To Have and Have Not," Marie first bleaches her hair blonde after a black man in Cuba has the audacity to speak to her. Catherine in "The Garden of Eden" also bleaches her hair to affirm her whiteness. At the heart of the "The Garden of Eden," David is writing "Eden," a story about his adventures in Africa. The inner tale shows an innocent, white-controlled Africa while the outer story shows an evil and chaotic Africanism. Catherine destroys and burns the inner story which shows white domination and slaughter with African servants who share David's "guilt and knowledge." The outer story comments on the aesthetic and mythological blackness. Both are pulled from fields of desire and need which are enabled by a discursive Africanism at the author's disposal.

Constructing American Literature

A primary concern of Toni Morrison's in this novel is the ways in which American literature is constructed and defined. Morrison starts a file to document instances of black people igniting moments of discovery in literature not written by them. Until recently, Morrison assumes that all readers of American fiction are white, and the effect of this assumption on the literary imagination fascinates her. Morrison considers how literary whiteness and blackness are made and what the consequences are of such a construction. The treasure trove of American literature amazes Morrison. Toni Morrison argues for extending the study of American literature into a wider landscape. Morrison debates the validity of the assumption that American literature is free from and unshaped by the four hundred year presence of African-Americans in the United States. Many assume that this presence has had no consequence in the origin and development of American literature.

Morrison contemplates the idea that this black presence is central to understanding America's national literature and wonders if the characteristics of American literature are not a response to the Africanist presence in the country. The omissions, contradictions, conflicts and ways that authors people their work with it shows that the Africanist presence is crucial to their sense of being American. Morrison's curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this Africanist presence becomes a study, called American Africanism. She uses this term, Africanism, to mean the denotative and connotative blackness that the African people have come to signify, and she notes that this presence provides a way of contemplating chaos and civilization, desire and fear, and the problems as well as the blessings of freedom. The United States is not unique in its construction of Africanism. In America, the processing of organizing American unity through a distancing Africanism is the main means of creating a new cultural authority.

Morrison's interest lies in what makes such domination possible and how agendas in criticism have disguised themselves and impoverished literature. She feels that it is important to recognize how inextricable the concept of Africanism is within literary criticism and to note the strategies used to hide its presence. By learning how Africanism functions in the literary imagination, Morrison believes it may be possible to discover the nature and cause of literary "whiteness." Silence and evasion rule literary discourse on race. American literature is concerned with the architecture of a new white man. Morrison believes that it is important to consider how the Africanist presence enriches text in self-conscious ways and what this engagement means for the work of the writer's imagination. She ponders how literary utterance arranges itself when trying to imagine an Africanist other. Toni Morrison considers Poe the most important early American writer in regards to the concept of American Africanism. Figurations of impenetrable whiteness occur in American literature when an Africanist presence is engaged.

Early American literature shows the fears, forces and hopes that present a striking image of how troubled early American literature is despite the fact that people make much of the potential, freedom and innocence. There is a strong affinity between the nineteenth century American psyche and gothic romance; this results, at least in part, because one way to benefit from past mistakes is to record them in order to avoid repetition in the future. A major theme in American literature is the ways that artists transfer internal conflicts to a "blank darkness." Morrison wants to show how the duties of persona (exorcism, reification and mirroring) are on demand and displayed throughout much of American literature, helping to form the distinguishing characteristics of American literature. The mind of American literature is preoccupied with the highly problematic construction of the American as a new, white man. The act of ignoring race in literature is a racist act in itself. The dark, abiding Africanist presence informs in American literature, hovering in the background as a shadow even when the literature is not about Africanist characters or idiom. American cannot exist without this Africanist presence; the term "American" is associated with race because it assumes white American unless specified otherwise. For early American writers, the Africanist other becomes a means of thinking about kindness, love, restraint, freedom, aggression, ethics, morality, religion and power. Color has significance due to the alliance between visually rendered ideas and linguistic utterances, leading to the social

and political nature of received knowledge as it is revealed in American literature. Artists, especially writers, respond to culture. Nineteenth century writers are mindful of the Africanist presence and address their views in their works. Slave narratives are a publication boom as the question of freedom compared to slavery rages. It is impossible to speak of political concerns with referring to Africans.

The metaphorical and metaphysical uses of race occupy definitive place in American literature and should be a major concern of the literary scholarship that tries to know it. The presence of blacks is inherent and inextricable from the definition of Americanness. Like in history, American literature represents a commentary on the transformations of racial difference. The literature also has an additional concern: the imagination interacting with the world. The linguistic responses to the Africanist presence complicate texts. Studies in American Africanism should investigate the ways that the Africanist presence and personae has been constructed and the literary uses it has served. Morrison's is not an investigation into racist or non-racist literature. She takes no position nor does she encourage one on the quality of a work based on an author's attitude toward race. Morrison's project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject. All of mankind is bereft when criticism is too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eyes.

Style

Perspective

Toni Morrison, the author and narrator of "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination," is also the author of Beloved, Song of Solomon and several other portrayals of African-American life. In this collection of essays, she examines the effect that the Africanist presence has on American literature and subsequently writers, especially black female writers, such as herself, writing in a racialized, sexualized, genderized world. Morrison writes to argue for the broadening of American literary studies in order to investigate the ways in which whiteness and blackness are constructed and the effect that this has on American literature.

Toni Morrison argues that, despite common notions to the contrary, the Africanist presence shares and forms American literature. She believes that it is impossible for America to be unaffected by its black population and offers evidence to support her point of view. Morrison's intended audience is readers and critics of American literature. Her expected or desired impact is to create in these readers and critics the desire to further examine the Africanist presence inherent in American literature.

Tone

The tone of this novel is first person and objective. The narrator presents her theories, providing samples from popular American literature to support these theories. Her tone is neither judgmental nor critical towards the authors whose works she analyzes. Toni Morrison presents her evidence very factually without any diversion into a sentimental area that could compromise the authenticity of her theories. She argues that race has become a metaphor for many other aspects of human nature.

Morrison analyzes American literature, investigating the black characters within specific works. She also discusses the narrative strategies and idiom used by white American fiction writers to present the Africanist presence that she sees as inherent and inextricable from American literature. Morrison believes that it is a pity that race plays such a large role in American literature, but it is even worse that such a large portion of literature is ignored because it is impolite to notice race. Morrison's essays hope to alter conventional notions about American literature and to encourage others to join her in examining the importance of the Africanist presence in American literature. Morrison concludes her book with that idea that this project is an "effort to turn the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject."

Structure

"Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination" is written in essay format and separated into three essays, preceded by a preface. The preface is nine pages, the

first chapter is twenty-six pages, and the second and third chapters are twenty-nine pages each. Each essay is titled to reflect the topics contained within the essay. Chapter one is entitled "Black Matters" and discusses the assumption that the Africanist presence does not affect American literature. Morrison analyzes Willa Cather's "Sapphira and the Slave Girl" in this chapter, discussing the topic of a white mistress' control over the bodies of her black slaves, as well as Cather's exploitation of blackness in order to define beliefs about whiteness and femininity.

The second chapter is called "Romancing the Shadow." It elaborates on the concepts of autonomy, authority, newness, difference and absolute power, which are the major themes of American literature and are made possible by the Africanist presence. Morrison analyzes "Voyagers to the West" and the new man that Bernard Bailyn describes within his book. She also extols upon Edgar Allen Poe's use of dialect as a means of separating and distinguishing whiteness and blackness. The third chapter, "Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks" focuses on the way that the Africanist presence asserts itself without the authorial intention. Studies in racism should consider the impact on those who perpetuate it as well as the victim. Morrison analyzes Hemingway's "To Have and Have Not" and "The Garden of Eden." She also considers Hemingway's use of white women as predatory sharks and black men as nurturing caregivers. Morrison concludes her book with that idea that this project is an "effort to turn the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject."

Positive aspects of the structure of this book include the separation of ideas and theories along with extensive analysis to support these theories. Conversely, it might be more effective to use a wider diversity of American writers, particularly writers of different ethnicity to compare against white writers of the times.

Quotes

"I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them. In fact I had started, casually like a game, keeping a file of such instances." Preface, page viii

"In Cardinal's narrative, black or colored people and symbolic figurations of blackness are markers for the benevolent and the wicked; the spiritual (thrilling tales of Allah's winged horse) and the voluptuous; of 'sinful' but delicious sensuality coupled with demands for purity and restraint." Preface, page ix

"The principal reason these matters loom large for me is that I do not have quite the same access to these traditionally useful constructs of blackness. Neither blackness nor 'people of color' stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering' of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains." Preface, page x through xi

"These chapters put forth an argument for extending the study of American literature into what I hope will be a wider landscape. I want to draw a map, so to speak, of a critical geography and use that map to open as much space for discovery, intellectual adventure, and close exploration as did the original charting of the New World- without the mandate for conquest. I intend to outline an attractive, fruitful, and provocative critical project, unencumbered by dreams of subversion or rallying gestures at fortress walls." Chapter 1: Black Matters, page 3

"For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as 'knowledge'. This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence- which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture- has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular 'Americanness' that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and powers, those views, genius, and power are without

relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States." Chapter 1: Black Matters, page 4 through 5

"It is important to see how inextricable Africanism is or ought to be from the deliberations of literary criticism and the wanton, elaborate strategies undertaken to erase its presence from view." Chapter 1: Black Matters, page 9

"My early assumptions as a reader were that black people signified little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers. Other than as the objects of an occasional bout of jungle fever, other than to provide local color or to lend some touch of verisimilitude or to supply a needed moral gesture, humor, or bit of pathos, blacks made no appearance at all. This was a reflection, I thought, of the marginal impact that blacks had on the lives of the characters in the work as well as the creative imagination of the author. To imagine or write otherwise, to situate black people throughout the pages and scenes of a book like some government quota, would be ludicrous and dishonest." Chapter 1: Black Matters, page 15

"As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dreams is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work not to see this." Chapter 1: Black Matters, page 17

"In returning to her childhood, at the end of her writing career, Cather returns to a very personal, indeed private experience. In her last novel she works out and toward the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism. She may not have arrived safely, like Nancy, but to her credit she did undertake the dangerous journey." Chapter 1: Black Matters, page 28

"The first white image seems related to the expiration and erasure of the serviceable and serving black figure, Nu-Nu. Both are figurations of impenetrable whiteness that surface in American literature whenever an Africanist presence is engaged." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 32 through 33

"The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license- from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined- for those fleeing for reasons other than religious ones, constraint and limitation impelled the journey. All the Old World offered these immigrants was poverty, prison, social ostracism, and, not infrequently, death." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 34

"But the strong affinity between the nineteenth-century American psyche and gothic romance has rightly been much remarked. Why should a young country repelled by Europe's moral and social disorder, swooning in a fit of desire and rejection, devote its talents to reproducing in its own literature the typology of diabolism it wanted to leave

behind? An answer to that seems fairly obvious: one way to benefit from the lessons of earlier mistakes and past misfortunes is to record them so as to prevent their repetition through exposure and inoculation." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 36

"The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring? Do they remain acid-free? The literature itself suggests otherwise." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 46

"A second topic in need of critical attention is the way an Africanist idiom is used to establish difference or, in a later period, to signal modernity. We need to explicate the ways in which specific themes, fears, forms of consciousness, and class relationships are embedded in the use of Africanist idiom: how the dialogue of black characters is construed as an alien, estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to disfamiliarize it; how Africanist language practices are employed to evoke the tension between speech and speechlessness; how it is used to establish a cognitive world split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinctions and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power; how it serves as a marker and vehicle for illegal sexuality, fear of madness, expulsion, self-loathing. Finally, we should look at how a black idiom and the sensibilities it has come to imply are appropriated for the associative value they lend to modernism- to being hip, sophisticated, ultra-urbane." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 52

"Jim permits his persecutors to torment him, humiliate him, and responds to the torment and humiliation with boundless love. The humiliation that Huck and Tom subject Jim to is baroque, endless, foolish, mind-softening- and it comes after we have experience Jim as an adult, a caring father and a sensitive man. If Jim had been a white ex-convict befriended by Huck, the ending could not have been imagined or written: because it would not have been possible for two children to play so painfully with the life of a white man (regardless of his class, education or fugitiveness) once he had been revealed to us as a moral adult. Jim's slave status makes play and deferment possible- but it also dramatizes, in style and mode of narration, the connection between slavery and the achievement (in actual and imaginary terms) of freedom." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 57

"If we follow through on the self-reflexive nature of these encounters with Africanism, it falls clear: images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable- all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable. Or so our writers seem to say." Chapter 2: Romancing the Shadow, page 59

"Race has become metaphorical- a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as

healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 63

"The ideological dependence on racialism is intact, and like its metaphysical existence, offers in historical, political, and literary discourse a safe route into meditations on morality and ethics; a way of examining the mind-body dichotomy, a way of thinking about justice, a way of contemplating the modern world." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 64

"The presence of black people is inherent, along with gender and family ties, in the earliest lesson every child is taught regarding his or her distinctiveness. Africanism is inextricable from the definition of Americanness- from its origins on through its integrated or disintegrating twentieth-century self." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 65

"Literature redistributes and mutates in figurative language the social conventions of Africanism." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 66

"Eddy is white, and we know he is because nobody says so." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 72

"We do not know what the black man said, but the horror is that he said anything at all. It is enough that he spoke, claimed an intimacy perhaps, but certainly claimed a view and inserted his sexual self into their space and their consciousness. By initiating the remark, he was a speaking, therefore aggressive, presence. In Marie's recollection, sexuality, violence, class, and the retribution of an impartial machine are fused into an all-purpose black man." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 77 through 78

"This extraordinary remark is saved and savored for Hemingway's description of a black female. The strong notion here is that of a black female as the furthest thing from human, so far away as to be not even mammal but fish." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 85

"I wish to close by saying that these deliberations are not about a particular author's attitudes toward race. That is another matter. Studies in American Africanism, in my view, should be investigations of the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanist presence and personae have been constructed- invented- in the United States, and of the literary uses this fabricated presence has served. In no way do I mean investigation of what might be called racist or nonracist literature, and I take no position, nor do I encourage one, on the quality of a work based on the attitudes of an author or whatever representations are made of some group." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 90

"It would be a pity if the criticism of that literature continued to shellac those texts, immobilizing their complexities and power and luminations just below its tight, reflecting surface. All of us, readers and writers, are bereft when criticism remains too polite or too fearful to notice a disrupting darkness before its eye." Chapter 3: Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks, page 91

Topics for Discussion

What is the purpose of "Playing in the Dark?"

What are the implications of white men calling blacks "nigger" instead of their actual names?

Define the Africanist presence in American literature.

Compare and contrast "nurses" and "sharks" in Hemingway's work.

Why is the Africanist presence so important in early American literature?

Why does Toni Morrison feel it is so important to address how the Africanist presence is constructed and its subsequent effect on American literature?

What is the difference between the study Toni Morrison proposes and a study on racism in literature?