The Toni Morrison Dreams Study Guide

The Toni Morrison Dreams by Elizabeth Alexander

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

"The Toni Morrison Dreams," by Elizabeth Alexander, was first published in issue 75 of *Hanging Loose*; next it appeared as part of Alexander's third collection, *Antebellum Dream Book*, published by Graywolf Press in 2001. "Antebellum" refers to the period before the American Civil War (1861—1865), and its use here suggests that this collection of dream poems though set in the second half of the twentieth century are of a time before race relations have evolved into a harmonious state of equality. A dream book is a collection of narratives that have dream-like qualities, which means that they mix rational and irrational elements sometimes presenting improbable events as ordinary or based on fact. To say these are dreams is to sanction this departure from verisimilitude, to allow for surprise and illogic which are the stuff of dreams. So the title alone suggests that the collection is a series of dream-like scenarios or scenes somehow connected to an American period of racial injustice.

The poems in *Antebellum Dream Book* are divided into three parts and "The Toni Morrison Dreams" appears in the second part. The poems include personal vignettes about childbirth, urban life, and historical events such as the mid-twentieth-century race riots and the Civil Rights movement. The poem analyzed in this entry focuses on the hierarchy implicit in a literary conference where aspiring or beginning writers flock to hear the celebrity author Toni Morrison read her own work and comment on theirs.

Author Biography

Elizabeth Alexander was born on May 30, 1962, in New York City and grew up in Washington, D.C. She is the daughter of Clifford Leopold Alexander, a business consultant, and Adele Logan Alexander, a historian and writer. Alexander received her bachelor's degree from Yale University in 1984. She went on to receive her master's degree from Boston University in 1987 and her Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992.

Though destined to become a poet and university professor, Alexander began her professional life with a one-year stint as a reporter for the *Washington Post*. During the last four years of the 1980s, she taught at several schools both in Philadelphia and Boston. For the academic year 1990—1991, Alexander was scholar-in-residence at Haverford College in Haverford, Pennsylvania. From 1991 to 1997, she was a reviewer for the *Village Voice* and assistant professor of English at the University of Chicago. After that, Alexander was the Grace Hazard Conkling Poet-in-Residence at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, and a lecturer in African American Studies and English at Yale University. As of the early 2000s, Alexander has been an adjunct associate professor of African American Studies at Yale, teaching in the Cave Canem Poetry Workshop.

By 2001, Alexander had published three books of poetry: *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), *Body of Life* (1996), and *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), which includes the poem "The Toni Morrison Dreams." In 2004, she published a collection of essays on popular culture, painting, and poetry called *The Black Interior*. In addition to these separate publications, her short stories, poetry, and criticism have appeared in various journals, including *American Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, and *Kenyon Review*.

While teaching at the University of Chicago, Alexander received the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. At Smith College, she was the first director of the Poetry Center. Alexander also served as a member of the editorial collective for *Meridians*, a feminist publication.

Plot Summary

1.

"The Toni Morrison Dreams" is a four-part poem sequence, which includes at least two explicitly different settings (a classroom workshop and an auditorium) and describes scenarios that are reminiscent of experiences one might have while attending a university-sponsored literary conference. The trick to appreciating the poem sequence lies in seeing how its details reveal much larger subjects, in this case pertaining to professional hierarchy and competition in the arts.

In section one, the scene takes place before the literary program is to begin. The speaker realizes that the presenter, the African American novelist Toni Morrison, "despises / conference coffee." So the speaker offers to "fetch" Morrison a coffee from Starbucks. The verb, fetch, reveals that the speaker assumes a much lower status than Morrison has. The speaker is happy to serve as an errand runner for the important author, eager to leave the meeting in order to get a coffee to please Morrison. Thus the speaker seeks to be singled out from the audience as the one who performs this service for Morrison. Getting "better" coffee for the presenter also suggests Morrison's elitist attitude; she "despises" the coffee everyone else in the room is probably drinking.

In the second stanza, the speaker notes that Morrison is "delighted" and says this coffee allows her to "start her day properly." Like a patted puppy that has performed a trick, the speaker feels special in the light of Morrison's appreciation of her service. But the elitism continues as Morrison takes out her French cigarettes, Gauloises. Morrison is discerning enough not to smoke ordinary American brands. The speaker watches Morrison like a fan would a movie star. Morrison shakes her "gorgeous, pewter dreads" and "sips the java" the speaker has brought her.

Then Morrison begins reading her own words: "*Nuns go by as quiet as lust*." This sentence is paradoxical or self-contradictory because the quiet walk of celibate nuns is compared to lust. While the sentence taken here out of context does not have much meaning, the speaker is affected by it. She comments, perhaps on Morrison's sentence: "Everything in silver-gray and black." This line perhaps suggests that the scene Morrison describes is rendered in these two colors. The comment may also be a description of Morrison herself, with her pewter hair and dark skin, drinking coffee, or perhaps the line describes how Morrison blanks out everything else in the room. Indeed the comment may extend to literally "everything," to the world at large and to the way in which a hierarchy of color tends to recur, between whites and blacks, between important African Americans and unimportant ones.

2. Workshop

In the second section, the speaker is a participant in a class conducted by Toni Morrison. The first stanza begins, "She asks us," and it goes without saying that the "she" refers to Toni Morrison, the star of this conference. The writing strategy Morrison suggests first is for the participants to adapt John Millington Synge's play *Playboy of the Western World*, which was written in 1907, to a contemporary stage. The next strategy is to "translate 'The Birds.'"

Readers may ask why Alexander alludes to these particular works. Synge's play is in part about how a person is evaluated by others who do not really know him. In this case, the main character, Christy Mahon, believes he has killed his cruel father and this presumed act wins Christy the praise of people in another town to which he flees. But when the father shows up with a wounded head and fights with his son, the townspeople form the opposite opinion of Christy. Thus, a person can be lauded or attacked depending on how he is viewed by others in the society who do not even know him. To adapt Synge's play to a "contemporary stage" invites class members to find a current and equivalent act that illustrates an attack on authority or the father figure that can incorporate some of the elements in Synge's play and make them relevant to the present time. The class members are also asked to translate Aristophanes' play *The Birds*, a fifth century b.c. comedy about two characters who try to escape taxes and a law suit by tricking the gods. Both of these assignments require the class members to work within the white male literary canon. These are academic assignments, which are not likely to be very relevant to aspiring African American writers who come to a Morrison-directed writing workshop hoping to gain something from Morrison's own insights.

In the second stanza, Morrison asks the participants to "think about clocks," to imagine the numbers as "glyphs," or symbols, and to "consider the time [they] spend watching them / in class, online, at the hairdresser's." These writing strategies may take the participants closer to their own experience, to their own lives. But it is unclear how exactly, if at all, these prompts connect directly with the class members. It is safe to say that students are asked to consider the symbols, not just in texts they study or try to emulate, but also the ones cued by the teacher. One part of the difficulty for students lies in finding a way to connect to the focus of the lecture and to the frame of mind of the teacher. Thus far these writing strategies ask writers to work more in the existing and dominant literary tradition rather than out of their unique frames of reference.

Morrison calls the speaker "Ouidah," and she answers. "Why 'Ouidah?'" a speaker-dreamer might ask upon waking from such a dream as this one. From the middle of the 1600s to the early 1700s, Ouidah was the leading port city on the Slave Coast of West Africa. From this city, an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Africans annually left their homeland and were crowded onto slave ships destined for the American colonies. Now Ouidah is a tourist spot to which travelers go to visit a museum of slave history and to see the coastal memorial to millions of Africans who disappeared from Africa's coast into slavery in distant places. Perhaps the speaker's willing subservience explains why

Morrison calls her by this name. Africans were denied their birth names and renamed by their slave owners. Perhaps the suggestion here is that the speaker is a "slave" to the system of higher education and to the influence of this celebrated teacher and author.

Next Morrison says, "'I am the yellow mother / of two yellow boys,'" a statement that makes the speaker "sit up straight," like a youngster who wants to impress her teacher. The reference to motherhood anticipates the next section in the poem in which the speaker reveals that she has a baby. It also may be for the speaker the most personally relevant comment Morrison has made thus far in the workshop. In the last stanza, the speaker says, "Now the work begins, and / Oh / the work is hard." The suggestion may be that once Morrison hits upon a personally relevant topic, the speaker feels compelled to begin writing. Another possibility is that with this topic the speaker is reduced to a grade-school student, sitting up straight to please the teacher. This reduction from full adult status and competence to child reduces the speaker's facility and fluency. She comments, understandably, that "the work is hard."

3.

In this section, Morrison evaluates the speaker's work. The speaker says Morrison "does not love / [her] work." A subjective evaluation like this one completely without qualification, explanation, or guidance is likely to fall on the speaker as a flat rejection of her work. The goal of the aspiring writer is not to please one important reader but rather to find what is inside herself and nurture that. She may be able to learn from role models, but ultimately she searches for her own voice and her own worldview. The valued inner part may be symbolized by the baby the speaker has with her that Morrison loves. Morrison "tells [her] / to have many more." If interpreted literally, this passage seems to say that the speaker is a young mother who brings her baby to this program. That she goes to the conference or into a writing workshop with her baby suggests that she is encumbered in more ways than one. She is pursuing two roles, as writer and as mother.

Morrison is her literary foremother□in a sense, a role model. But instead of encouraging the speaker in her professional pursuits, by perhaps pointing out how the speaker's writing works and how she might develop it further, Morrison tells her to have more babies. To have more babies is possibly to incapacitate the speaker all the more in her pursuit of education and writing. That Morrison "loves" the baby is praise for the young mother; that Morrison tells her to have more babies is discouragement for the speaker's aspirations as a writer. Looked at another way, the baby may signify the speaker's sense that her creativity is interior and that she is already fully engaged in the process of creating this inner self. This idea implies that a woman's baby can be a symbol of the woman's creative work, a literary work for example. The dreamer designs the dream, controls all parts of it, and these parts can signify different things or have more than one meaning. The same is true of poetry.

4. A Reading at Temple University

The fourth section presents notes taken by the speaker who is in the audience during a reading Toni Morrison gives at Temple University. The speaker writes down words. "Love" repeats five times. Among several other words, the speaker writes down "amanuensis." An amanuensis is a slave who performs secretarial duties or someone who has the job of copying a manuscript. The amanuensis does not initiate or create a text, but rather she takes dictation or copies the text. An aspiring writer who sits in an audience taking notes is not being independently creative but is acting more like a secretary. Also listed are biblical names, "Shadrack, Solomon, Hagar." Some of the words are spaced apart, not in sentences, as if the speaker is drifting off to sleep or not paying attention. The letters "sth" stand alone. At the end, the speaker speaks, whispers the word, "love," as though that is what matters most, more than listening, copying, particular words, or biblical persons. More than publishing one's own words or becoming famous, love matters most.

Themes

Celebrity Status of Famous Authors

Toni Morrison won a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her 1987 novel *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. *Beloved* was made into a film, and Oprah Winfrey, in selecting her as her favorite author, brought additional attention to Morrison. Elizabeth Alexander uses Morrison in this poem sequence because Morrison is so well-known. This kind of celebrity wields much influence in the academic setting and with aspiring writers. The poem explores how effective such a writer may be in working with and encouraging others. It also asks if in the presence of a person of such stature a beginning writer can maintain her own voice and withstand the blow of possible criticism. The easy assumption might be that in the presence of greatness, one can learn the essential tricks to the trade of becoming great. On the other hand, the case may be that the beginner's hopes can all too easily be quashed.

A dream book is a record of the writer's dreams, nighttime dreams, daydreams, and dreamed of goals. "The Toni Morrison Dreams" suggests all kinds of dreams. The speaker dreams about attending a lecture by Morrison and having Morrison hear her own writing and see her baby. The poet Elizabeth Alexander also may dream about being a celebrated writer like Morrison, achieving that kind of status and having that kind of impact on others. Using the dream framework, Alexander can explore the difficulties involved in being a young woman and mother and aspiring writer, of seeking out the celebrity writer and putting herself in the unnerving position of trying to win that celebrity's praise. In this poem sequence, the speaker wins Morrison's appreciation for bringing her coffee and for having a baby but fails to win it for her own writing.

Hierarchy among African Americans

The poem dramatizes the hierarchy that exists between celebrity author and audience member, between famous writer and beginning writer, between teacher and student. The Temple University setting provides as backdrop the hierarchy which permeates higher education, the one in the know is singled out for the podium and everyone else is relegated to the audience rows below them. In this case, the dreamer of the poem, the speaker, is an African American woman and aspiring writer. Although she has validity in her own right she immediately relegates herself to the role of a step-and-fetch-it servant in order to "win points" with Morrison. That Morrison gets to have a better coffee also underscores the two tier gathering: the conference coffee is good enough for the attendees but not good enough for Morrison. Perhaps part of the "antebellum" nature of this poem is the way in which among African Americans themselves, the factor of status and power replicates the hierarchy of white over black: the elite savor their refined tastes and the underlings cater to them.

Style

Literary Allusion

Alexander uses literary allusion in her poem "The Toni Morrison Dreams" by making reference to other literary works. In the second part of the poem, one of the strategies Morrison suggests is to adapt the 1907 play *Playboy of the Western World* to a contemporary stage. The assumption is that the workshop participants know this work by the late-nineteenth-century Irish playwright, John Millington Synge. The play is about a son's rebellion against his father and the way in which the son is evaluated by others. In order to try out Morrison's strategy, the participants have to know the play. Morrison also asks participants to translate *The Birds*, a comedy by Aristophanes, which would require them to know Greek.

First-Person Point of View

Alexander uses the eye witness of a single speaker who reports on what Morrison says and does. The speaker quotes Morrison as she addresses her audience and the workshop participants. Everything the poem presents comes through the speaker's eyes, from her point of view. This angle on the subject emphasizes the celebrity status of Morrison and the adoration of the speaker who wants to be noticed and validated by Morrison. Though the speaker seeks validation for her writing, she reports that Morrison does not love her writing but does love her baby, which suggests that Morrison is quicker to validate her as a mother than as a writer.

Characterization

"The Toni Morrison Dreams" characterizes two women: the novelist Toni Morrison and the speaker who is an aspiring writer and a new mother. Morrison is particular about her coffee and her brand of cigarettes. She has her gray hair done up in impressive dreadlocks. She gives strategies for writing and reads from her own writing. The speaker is so eager to participate in the program that she does not allow the encumbrance of having a little baby stop her from attending. As a writer herself, the speaker seeks Morrison's praise and encouragement and takes what she gets. The speaker admits Morrison "does not love / [her] work, but she loves / my baby, tells me / to have many more."

Historical Context

In 1993 Toni Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Frequently compared to the southern novelist William Faulkner, Morrison has written extraordinary, highly poetic and original novels about the south and about race relations. In April 1998, Morrison gave a lecture in Boyer Theater at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She read from her new novel *Paradise*, which was published that same year. In the poem, the speaker is a member of the audience who hears Morrison's presentation. Morrison's reading at Temple was very well received.

Critical Overview

As of 2005, Alexander has produced three books of poetry. The first, *The Venus Hottentot*, published in 1990, is, according to a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* (July 23, 2001), "a stellar debut." However, that work was followed by the less impressive *Body of Life* (1996), which the same reviewer calls "a relative slump." *Antebellum Dream Book*, in this reviewer's opinion is first rate, its poems are "aggressively vivid" and "impressive." This reviewer also points out that this book is published by the well-funded Graywolf Press, affording the work better visibility.

A reviewer for the *Library Journal* (January 2002) identifies "memory and race" as Alexander's main themes. This reviewer emphasizes the African Americans to whom Alexander alludes in the collection: Nat King Cole, Michael Jordon, Muhammad Ali, and Toni Morrison. The reviewer also praises Alexander's poems about giving birth and being a new mother.

Finally, Stephen Burt, writing in the *Yale Review* (July 2002) describes Alexander's poems as "accomplished." Burt criticizes Alexander's ear for being "hardly infallible" but acknowledges her "range of rhythms" and variety of poetic forms. He points out that her work is inspired by blues, ballads, and jazz. He also praises her for skillful juxtaposition.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Melodie Monahan has a Ph.D. in English. She teaches at Wayne State University and also operates an editing service, The Inkwell Works. In the following essay, Monahan analyzes "The Toni Morrison Dreams" in order to show how Alexander conveys Morrison's celebrity status through a sequence of dream vignettes that culminate with the poem's most important value, love.

The title of Alexander's *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001) suggests the tenuous and sometimes illogical thread that strings together the images in these individual dreamlike poems. Like a book in which a person records her dreams, logging the fanciful plots as they surface in memory upon waking, this collection presents separate poems that more or less exploit the liberty of dreams in order to step beyond the ordinary into fresh combinations. These combinations are often dream-like images or juxtaposed scenes that are not restricted by verisimilitude, logical sequence, or cause-and-effect relationships. The poet, like a dreamer, allows free association and seemingly random images to float into the text and on that sea of receptivity and fancy, the reader moves from one topic to another, observing how wish fulfillment, animated fears, and psychic disclosures take shape and become in some cases weird elements of plot. "The Toni Morrison Dreams" comprises four vignettes, all pertaining to an appearance Toni Morrison makes at a conference held at Temple University in Philadelphia. In these little scenes or dreams, the narrator gets as close as she can to the famous African American novelist and Nobel Prize winner.

In the first vignette, the scene takes place in the morning right before a writing workshop conducted by Morrison is to begin. In this dream, Toni Morrison expresses her hatred for "conference coffee," and the narrator offers "to fetch her a Starbucks." To be able to "fetch" anything for a writer of Morrison's stature and importance is an honor to this narrator, and the use of this particular verb emphasizes both the narrator's unabashed pride and her lowly status by contrast. She seems thrilled to be helpful and proud that Morrison is "delighted, can start her day properly." Then the narrator notices that Morrison takes out a pack of French cigarettes, Gauloises. Morrison is discriminating about her coffee, about her cigarettes. She is particular, has class, and, the narrator notes, is beautiful. The narrator sums up the portrait by describing how Morrison "shakes her gorgeous, pewter dreads, / sips the java that I brought her / and reads her own words." Morrison reads her own words: "*Nuns go by as quiet as lust*," and the narrator concludes that "Everything [is] silver-gray and black." Morrison's words about nuns, presumably in black with white wimples, Morrison's black skin and pewter dreadlocks, the whole scene becomes the hue of Morrison and her words.

Thus Alexander economically and concisely establishes the celebrity status of Toni Morrison and the rapt adoration of the aspiring writer who attends the conference and the morning workshop Morrison directs. Mostly, the relationship between the two women is established in the offer to get Morrison coffee and in the way Morrison's presence and words transform a world of color into the monochromic hues of "silver-gray and black."

The second section is called *Workshop*. Morrison is identified as "She." It goes without saying that the narrator refers to Morrison. Who else would she be speaking about? Morrison is the only "star" present, and "she" is in charge. She tells the writing workshop participants to "adapt / Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* / for the contemporary stage." Morrison assumes the writers know this 1907 Irish play well enough that they can create changes in it that would suit a late-twentieth-century production. She also asks them to translate "'The Birds'" by Aristophanes, a task that would require them to know Greek. Neither of these academic assignments are likely to be assigned in a creative writing workshop, however. But their effect on participants might be understandably intimidating.

Next Morrison asks the participants "to think about clocks, / see the numbers as glyphs, / consider the time [they] spend watching them // in class, on line, at the hairdresser's." This second strategy moves the group from academic knowledge to personal knowledge; it moves them from the analytical exercises of adapting the Irish play or translating the Greek classical play to a much more personal level, inviting them to free associate, reflect on personal moments, and experiment.

Jumping further into the personal, the narrator says that Morrison calls her "Ouidah," the French word for yes, *oui*, and the first syllable of daughter, *-dah*. Morrison has given the narrator a nickname, which suggests familiarity and friendliness, perhaps even tenderness. Then Morrison says, "I am the yellow mother / of the two yellow boys," a line that makes the narrator "sit up straight." The line speaks directly to the narrator, connecting with her as a woman of color or blended race and as a mother of two. With these lead-ins to writing, the participants begin, and the narrator comments, "Now the work begins, and / Oh / the work is hard." Thus in this dream workshop, drawing from reality about how workshops may actually be conducted, Alexander maps out how Morrison as facilitator takes the group from the outer world and from intellectual knowledge toward the inner world of free association and reflections about common objects, in this case the numbers on the face of a clock. Empowered by being given a nickname, by a few cues that connect with the narrator's own life, the narrator is able to begin to write but finds doing so hard work.

In the third section, the reader learns that the narrator has brought her baby to the workshop, in the real world a highly unlikely decision. The narrator admits, Morrison "does not love / my work, but she loves // my baby, tells me / to have many more." In this dream poem, indeed, in a dream, the dreamer can imagine such a scene where two forms of creativity merge, writing and motherhood. The narrator is an aspiring writer, a fan of Morrison, a person who wants to find her way into publication and leave her mark on literature. But the narrator is also a new mother; she has her hands full at the moment with a little baby. These two ways of being productive, writing and motherhood, can be in conflict. If a woman has her hands full with a baby, she may not have a hand free for writing. But in the dream, the narrator imagines Morrison loves her baby and tells her to have many more. What does this directive mean? It might mean that the dreamed of Morrison is saying that the narrator's writing is not wonderful but her baby is and the narrator's place is in the home having more children. It is also possible that the dreamed of Morrison is saying that she loves the "baby" of this narrator, both her

beginnings in words and her beginnings in flesh. The word is the idea made flesh, and childbirth is a likely metaphor for book birth (publication).

The last section of the poem, the fourth dream of Morrison, is titled *A Reading at Temple University*. (In fact, Toni Morrison appeared at Temple University on April 8, 1998, and read an excerpt from her new novel *Paradise*, a novel about the love of God and the love human beings feel for one another. Elizabeth Alexander was teaching in Boston and Philadelphia at that time and perhaps she was able to attend this reading.) Now the "she" seems to be the narrator who dreams of listening to Morrison read and takes notes, writes down the words Morrison uses. She writes "love" down four times along with other words. "Amanuensis" she writes down; an amanuensis is a person who takes dictation or transcribes a manuscript. In this audience at Temple University, the narrator is in effect taking dictation, writing down the words Morrison reads. She writes other words, "'velvet,' 'pantry,' 'lean.'" These words appear in quotation marks; she is quoting the speaker's words.

Then the narrator writes biblical names, "Shadrack, Solomon, Hagar." Shadrack, Meshack, and Abednego are three Hebrews named in *Daniel* who refuse to worship a graven image and are cast into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar. They are seen in the furnace with a fourth person, thought to be the Son of God, and they emerge unharmed and free even of the smell of smoke (*Daniel* 3:12-30). Solomon, son of David and known for his wisdom, is granted his wish for "an understanding heart" (*1 Kings* 3:9), and Solomon is the one who determines which woman is the true mother of the baby two women claim (*1 Kings* 3:16-30). Hagar, servant of Abraham's wife, Sarah, bares Abraham a son, Ishmael, but when Sarah herself has a son, Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the desert to die. An angel directs them to water and saves their lives (*Genesis* 21). In time Ishmael has twelve sons of his own from whom the Arab people are said to have descended. These three biblical names are thus connected to stories of blessing, survival, and reproduction.

The narrator writes, "Jadine," the name of a Sorbonne-educated, beautiful, black model in Morrison's 1981 novel *Tar Baby*. Then she writes a couple other words along with the letters "sth." The section ends with "and then, / she whispered it, // love." The reading affirms Morrison's emphasis on love. Love is the impetus and the reason for writing, as it is for having and rearing children. That word alone is the ending point of the dream sequence. The four sections, then, begin in the adoration for the celebrity writer Toni Morrison, and move through scenes of writing for and with Morrison to the final scene of listening to Morrison read and the narrator writing notes, which seem themselves to suggest ideas of survival and reproduction toward the most important piece, love itself.

Source: Melodie Monahan, Critical Essay on "The Toni Morrison Dreams," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Holm is a short story and novel author, and a freelance writer. In this essay, Holm looks at Alexander's dreamlike style, strategic placement of words and lines, and allusion to race and color in this poem.

In "The Toni Morrison Dreams," a serial poem with a subtle and edgy quality, Alexander uses language to create allusions to race. Alexander also strategically places words and lines in the poem for maximum impact. The author conveys a strange, dreamlike tone in the words and events that are chosen in this poem.

The four parts of this serial poem revolve around the interaction between the narrator and the African American writer Toni Morrison. There is a workshop and a reading. Two other portions of the poem seem to serve as segues, much like a dream might proceed. The procession of the poem seems oddly spontaneous□giving it a dreamlike, unpredictable quality. For example, the poem seems to start out in the moments prior to a reading or workshop by Toni Morrison. It feels as if this is indeed the beginning of a day. Toni Morrison can now "start her day properly," having received the kind of coffee she likes best.

It then makes sense that the workshop scene would follow in part two of this serial poem. But part three comes out of nowhere, much like a dream might proceed. The reader cannot be sure what prompts Toni Morrison to remark on and love the narrator's baby. If Toni Morrison does not love the narrator's work in the workshop, but loves the baby, did the narrator bring her baby to the workshop? Or did the narrator and Morrison meet at another time? Or is the third part of this serial poem unrelated to the events in the rest of the poem? It is also possible that Alexander intended to parallel the mothering and birthing of a baby with the creation of artistic work, both of which are creative acts. In this interpretation, Toni Morrison could be telling the narrator to continue creating new writing, which would be in keeping with this type of symbolism common in dreams.

Part four of the poem refers to a Toni Morrison reading. The reader cannot be sure whether all the events of the poem took place together, or if they are simply dream segments that share only the common theme of Toni Morrison's presence. In its entirety, the procession of the poem is quite dreamlike, since dreams often disregard linear time and move and shift with no particular order. Part four sounds and feels surreal. The reader cannot be sure whether Morrison's reading actually consisted of the words presented on the page, or whether these are words that were part of a reading□words that stayed in the narrator's mind. If the reading is dreamlike, which the reader can assume, given the name of this poem and the premise of Alexander's collection (*The Antebellum Dream Book*), then this random presentation of words very much resembles the spontaneity of a dream.

What is interesting about part four of this poem is that the reading seems to come full circle. Morrison starts out by writing "love" four times. At this point, the reader cannot be

sure whether Morrison is writing, or reading out loud from her writing. Even though the stanza uses the term "she wrote," Morrison could still be reading from writing that she wrote at one point. The second stanza is even more of a mystery. The words in this stanza are still enclosed in quotation marks, but now the reader is not told whether Morrison is writing or speaking the words. The first word in this stanza, "amanuensis," actually refers to a person who is skilled at transcribing speech. Perhaps Alexander is subtly trying to capture the transition of the creation of writing, from when it is written on the page, to when it is spoken out loud at a reading. The third stanza loses the quotes, but uses an assortment of capitalized words that appear to denote places or people. The fourth stanza loses all punctuation, but the word "circles" is used, perhaps alluding to the fact that the reading ends where it began.

The last line of part four is "love" and it is spoken, rather than written. As if to imply its power, the word "love" is whispered. With an apt choice of words, Alexander writes, "and then, she whispered it." The inclusion of "it" at the end of this phrase creates a little more suspense and impact, and gives the reader pause to wonder what "it" is, before reading the final line of the poem. If Alexander had written "and then, she whispered," there would not be the almost indiscernible pause between "whispered it" and "love." They would instead run together a little sooner in the reader's mind. It is this pause, which Alexander achieves with the addition of "it," that gives the final stanza ("love") of the poem the power it deserves. And with the beginning and ending of part four, perhaps Alexander is trying to say that love supercedes many of the other ideas and words in existence. Certainly, love is emphasized over the random assortment of words in part four.

Throughout this serial poem, Alexander uses intentional, strategic placement of lines and words for emphasis and impact. The end of part four is a good example of this. When Morrison "whispered it, // love," the word "love" is set off in a stanza of its own. The third stanza from the end of the poem "circles sth runagate" seems to be purposefully presented as it is, perhaps to demonstrate an overall trend away from the structure of "she wrote" and of quotation marks and of names to what is really important (love).

Intentional placement of words and lines for emphasis is used in other parts of "The Toni Morrison Dreams." In part one of the poem, Alexander sets off "*Nuns go by as quiet as lust*." This seems to follow a grammatical convention. In written work, dialogue is often set off in a paragraph of its own. But while this could be considered dialogue (since Morrison begins reading out loud after sipping her "java"), it also forces the reader to insert a pause between "words:" and "Nuns." The reader inserts this pause, whether the poem is read out loud or in the mind.

The last stanza of part two also uses placement of words and lines for emphasis.

Now the work begins, and

Oh

the work is hard.

This entire stanza would be much less effective if it was written as one line. Again, breaking the lines between "and" and "Oh" as well as between "Oh" and "the" gives real impact to the word "Oh." Mental or auditory pauses are inserted by the reader, whether reading the poem out loud or silently. "Oh" is also capitalized for further emphasis.

Part three of "The Toni Morrison Dreams" also uses word placement effectively. In this case, Alexander breaks phrases unconventionally in the lines within the two stanzas in part three. Instead of using the commas to end each line, she chooses to end the first two lines with the words "love" and "loves," a possible foreshadowing of what is to come in part four.

She does not love

my work, but she loves

my baby, tells me

to have many more.

These stanzas would read very differently if the commas defined the lines.

She does not love my work,

but she loves my baby,

tells me to have many more.

Alexander's placement of line breaks emphasizes "love" and "my work" and "my baby." Alexander also breaks for a new stanza right before "my baby." This seems to emphasize separate facets of the narrator's life□the work of writing and the act of mothering.

"The Toni Morrison Dreams" is full of references to color. Some of these references could be interpreted as allusions to race. Toni Morrison "despises" conference coffee, the implication being that Starbucks will make a stronger (blacker?) cup of coffee. Morrison's dreads are pewter. The last line of part one ("Everything in silver-gray and black") could be referring to nuns, or could refer to all of what has been presented in part one. Perhaps part one is a dream in silver-gray and black. If so, why is the narrator not dreaming in color? Nuns also imply black and white, with the image of their traditional garb. Black and white are opposites, but silver-gray implies something in between. Alexander could be alluding to the fact that divisions between races become more and more blurred. In part two of the poem, Morrison says, "'I am the yellow mother / of the two yellow boys.'" Whatever this means, it causes the narrator to "sit up straight." The implied importance of the statement also causes the reader to take notice. And since the entire poem is like a dream, it may not matter whether the statement is explained or not. The reader can make his or her own inferences about any allusions to

race. In part two of this poem, the name "Ouidah" is also a racial reference; Ouidah was a historical location for the export of slaves.

Because the premise of this poem is based on a dream, Alexander is free to model the poem in a dreamlike manner. Like a dream, thoughts and words and events do not always follow in a logical fashion. But the astute reader can dig deeper and look for Alexander's implied emphasis on certain words and ideas. And for the reader willing to look deeply and read with a critical eye, the poem is full of symbolism and suggested allusion.

Source: Catherine Holm, Critical Essay on "The Toni Morrison Dreams," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Topics for Further Study

Keep a dream book for several weeks, then take story lines and images from the recorded dreams to make up some poems. Read these poems to your classmates and invite them to analyze the poems' meanings.

Research Sigmund Freud's book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) in order to learn about Freud's theories concerning the subconscious and how dreams contain symbols and imagery that may be interpreted as revealing the dreamer's psychological makeup and may then be used for creative work. Then write a short story about a person who has high dream recall and finds the answers to his or her daytime problems by paying attention to the recalled dreams.

Attend a literary conference held by a local college or university and observe the key note speaker's behavior and body language as you listen to their presentation. Then write a character study of that speaker, selecting details that hint at who the real person is behind the performance.

Do some research on groupies, people who follow a particular musician or actor and attend their performances in the hope of getting some personal contact with the person. Write a paper about how celebrities and their fans interact, both in positive and negative ways. Such a paper might examine, for example, the possible causes for Princess Diana's death in a car crash.

In 1974, the term "supermom" was coined. It describes a woman who fulfills all the traditional wifely and maternal responsibilities and is able to balance those with a full-time professional life outside the home. Research this concept and ideal as it was considered during the women's liberation movement and then write a paper on how the private life and professional aspirations of a person can reinforce each other or be in conflict.

What Do I Read Next?

Alexander's first book of poetry, *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), was praised widely and the title poem is often anthologized.

In 2004, Graywolf Press published a new book of essays by Alexander. *The Black Interior* takes a look at the role of the African American artist, both in the black community and in the larger dominant white culture.

Smoke, published by BOA Editions in 2000, is a collection of poems by Dorianne Laux. These works vividly portray such diverse topics as the portrait of a daughter, a wife's erotic longing for her husband, and popular culture.

Winner of the thirteenth annual Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize, *Echolocations*, by Diane Thiel, explores various subjects connected to themes of dislocation, landscape, and memory. Thiel's poems stretch across time and continent to include a parent's memories of being a boy in Germany during World War II. This collection was published by Story Line Press in 2000.

Further Study

Baker, Houston A., Jr., *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writings*, DIANE Publishing, 1998.

Alexander and Patricia Redmond provide phototext for Baker's analysis of African American women's writings and theories developing about African American studies. Baker examines Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, Morrison's *Sula*, and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass*. The book includes thirty-nine images of black women which convey in picture form the poetics Baker discusses.

Egar, Emmanuel Edame, *Black Poets of Harlem Renaissance*, University Press of America, 2003.

Unlike most of the previous studies of the Harlem Renaissance, this book looks at the literary achievement of women poets active during this period and subsequently ignored or omitted. Egar argues that African American women poets of this period wrote about the black spirit in ways quite distinct from their fellow male poets.

Kowit, Steve, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*, Tilbury House, 1995.

Kowit knows a lot about poetry and presents in a low-key and accessible manner many models and strategies for aspiring poets. He also explores style and explains skills that new writers would do well to cultivate. The poems included as models are mostly from unknown yet excellent poets.

Morrison, Toni, *Beloved*, Knopf, 1987.

Morrison's poetic novel brings to life the haunting legacy of slavery and a mother's resolve not to bring children into the world where some slave catcher might return them to captivity. Sethe is so impassioned in her resolve to keep her baby "free" that she murders it to avoid the possibility that it will be kidnapped and returned to slavery. Afterward the dead child in the form of a young woman called Beloved haunts Sethe and causes her house to vibrate with her spiritual presence. This novel intricately braids an extraordinary story with highly poetic and evocative language, and the paranormal scenes are dreamlike in their irrational logic.

Novakovich, Josip, *Fiction Writer's Workshop*, Story Press, 1995.

Would-be novel writers will enjoy this study of the novel as a form, a book full of writing strategies, helpful definitions, and excerpts from works of fiction.

Bibliography

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Review of *Antebellum Dream Book*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 248, No. 130, July 23, 2001, p. 68.