

Reflection Statement

A Dangerous Artist is a meditation on the relationship between composer and reader, exploring the tensions between postmodern theory and marginalised communities through an adapted auteur study of Toni Morrison's fiction. The essay defines this tension and demonstrates Morrison's response while grounding the reader in key theory and formally challenging the established intellectual apparatus used to resolve the interpretive demands of her work. While postmodern thinking is widely embraced now, this popularity erases the ongoing struggles of marginalised peoples to reconcile their fight for recognition and redemption with the potential of Postmodernism to diminish them. As such, *A Dangerous Artist* is part of the growing reappraisal of Postmodernism, seen in political terms on university campuses globally as marginalised students refuse to bow to relativist values that would tolerate discriminatory viewpoints. The essay proposes that Toni Morrison's work represents a reconciliation between the necessity to engage with Postmodernism felt in intellectual circles and the need to protect political, activist literature from destruction. Through close examination of the textual mechanics of three of her texts (*Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Jazz*), the essay shows that she creates an African-American postmodern – a compromise between immobilising postmodern critiques and writing as a political vocation.

This essay arose from reading key Modernist texts in the American canon, particularly Ernest Hemingway's short stories, in the Preliminary Extension module 'The Individual and Society' and identifying what I named the 'fight for freedom' tradition in American literature. I defined this as literary attempts to deify the American Revolution's legacy through emancipation from power structures and external scrutiny. Studying *Apocalypse Now* in the Preliminary Advanced course affirmed that this tradition was fundamental to American social consciousness, as

seen through Willard's narration. Even in its primitive state, my work took the essay form given that I needed the argumentative clarity the form affords to define and advance my observations, whether it was the 'fight for freedom' tradition or Morrison's African-American postmodern. Initially, I intended to examine this 'fight for freedom' tradition through Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*¹ and Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*². Initial research exposed me to postmodern social and political theory defining relationships between individuals, groups and power structures, particularly Foucault's ideas expressed in *Power/Knowledge*³ that informed my understanding of Morrison's relationship with established institutions, particularly evident in the essay's parody and neologisms sections. However, I found Thoreau and Kerouac lacked clear perspectives on experiences of oppression. The protagonists' narratives were personal journeys rather than fights against entrenched custom and power. Previous exposure to Morrison and Maya Angelou had interested me in their incisive characterisation of African-American experiences of oppression. Accordingly, I narrowed my focus to African-American writing within this key American trope.

With Morrison's *Beloved* and Audre Lorde's poetry and essays, I began writing as an exploration of African-American women appropriating this tradition. Lorde's essay collection *Sister Outsider*⁴ was key. In particular, the essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' poignantly explored of the predicament of African-Americans in appropriating oppressive structures and institutions to their cause. However, two realisations struck me: firstly, that I was so intrigued by Morrison that the other texts fell to the wayside and, secondly, that this intrigue arose from the unique hermeneutic challenges in her work. How, for instance, was I to

¹ Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*, New York. Penguin, 1986, (originally published 1854).

² Kerouac, Jack. *On The Road*. New York, Penguin Books, 2008, (originally published 1957).

³ Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1980.

⁴ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Berkeley, Ten Speed Press, 1984.

resolve the irony (discussed in the 'Self-referentiality' section) that Morrison asks her reader not to 'pass on' the story she has just relayed? This feature appeared to merit study so I limited my essay to Morrison with a focus on her relationship with Postmodernism. Nonetheless, Lorde nuanced my understanding of post-Civil Rights African-American thinking and she appears in the "Lamenting the 'loss of meaning'" section of my essay, explaining the contextual challenges to intellectual apparatus. Further reading of African-American authors including Maya Angelou⁵, bell hooks⁶, Ta-Nehisi Coates⁷ and W.E.B. Du Bois⁸ deepened my understanding of African-American literary tropes while my canonical original focus nuanced my understanding of the indelibly political nature of American literature.

The dense postmodern theory with which I engaged demanded a formal academic register to suit a scholarly readership. Reading Morrison's own essays such as her socio-cultural history *The Origin of Others*⁹ and Ta-Nehisi Coates' lyrical expression in *Between the World and Me*¹⁰ pointed me towards an accessible tone, however, their form of personal essay, which foregrounded the writer, was not a style I sought to emulate. This perception arose from reading Morrison's introductions¹¹, afterwords¹² and interviews¹³ where she repeatedly says that "I never asked Tolstoy to write for me, a little colored girl in Lorain, Ohio. ... I don't know why I should be asked to explain your life to you. ... From my perspective there are only black people. When I say 'people,' that's what I mean"¹⁴. While this did not preclude me from a critical standpoint, it seemed

⁵ Angelou, Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York, Hachette, 1969.

⁶ Hooks, Bell. "Postmodern Blackness", *Postmodern Culture*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1990.

⁷ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between The World And Me*. New York City, Spiegel & Grau, 2015.

⁸ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls Of Black Folk*. A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903.

⁹ Morrison, Toni. *The Origin Of Others*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2017.

¹⁰ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *op.cit.*

¹¹ The introduction to *Beloved* (1987) is notable

¹² The afterword written in 1993 to *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is notable

¹³ Morrison, Toni, and Danille Taylor-Guthrie. *Conversations With Toni Morrison*. Jackson, Univ. Press Of Mississippi, 1994.

¹⁴ Leclair, Thomas. "The Language Must Not Sweat". *The New Republic*, March 21, 1981

disingenuous to write a personal essay that foregrounded my response to experiences distinctly different to my own. Similarly, experimental essay forms such as the lyric essay in Judith Kitchen's article 'Grounding the Lyric Essay'¹⁵ interested me, however, I did not believe that I could sufficiently control my position in the essay nor would I be able to achieve the same analytical density that I might in formal academic prose.

In broaching an essay about the particularities of an African-American woman's writing to the African-American experience, I felt I had to challenge my own right to interpret and be self-conscious of the relationships I bore to the text. Reading Morrison's own attitudes to her work in *The Origin of Others*¹⁶ and *Toni Morrison: Conversations*¹⁷ informed this, however, this also arose from distaste for a popular brand of criticism¹⁸ that seeks to 'whitewash' Morrison to fit her into a broader canon of American literature, most often in the shadow of William Faulkner. This criticism is not hostile, nor ill-intentioned, but betrays a naivety about Morrison's radical purpose and gives little credence to her hostility towards canonisation. The position of my voice in the essay was a key way of addressing my own role, however, I also read theory on the matter, notably that of Ann DuCille¹⁹ who offers a framework to approach African-American woman's work respectfully. Finally, I read African-American cultural theory extensively, privileging these responses over white interpretations, spurring Cornel West, Du Bois, and bell hooks' inclusion.

¹⁵ Kitchen, Judith. "Grounding the Lyric Essay." *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2011, pp. 115–121.

¹⁶ Morrison, *op.cit.*

¹⁷ Morrison, Toni, and Danille Taylor-Guthrie, *op.cit.*

¹⁸ The essay collection *Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-envisioned* (1997) contains many exemplars of this tradition.

¹⁹ DuCille, Ann. "The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies." *Signs*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 591–629.

I was, however, unwilling to bend entirely to the form of essay that I read in scholarly journals. While my tone and register suited the scholarly audience typical of journals such as *Frontiers*²⁰ or the *African American Review*²¹ which had each furnished me with critical scholarship, I was dissatisfied to write a formal academic essay about radical literary politics without noting the critical essay form as part of the established intellectual apparatus that Morrison attacks. My use of quoted subheadings through the essay is my reminder to the reader of the form's limitations and the intellectual institution's hostility; that the ideas being expressed simultaneously cannot be expressed fully inside or outside of the form. Harold Bloom's introduction²² from which I quote and misquote these subheadings was a frustrating piece of scholarship embodying much of what I believe to be an exclusory scholarly tradition. By misquoting him and effectively using his quotes against him in this context, I aim to recall the hostility that Morrison's emancipatory exercise has induced and the inhospitable nature of the critical form to her work. As such, my final essay has some degree of formal self-consciousness that makes it suitable for popular literary journals such as *Apogee*²³ that, in its mission to combine "literary aesthetic with political activism," accords both with my own and Morrison's.

While keeping a scholarly reader, fluent in African-American literature in mind, in reality, my actual audience may have less familiarity with Morrison's work and the theory I draw upon. Accordingly, I used the second section of my essay titled "Lamenting the 'loss of meaning'" to explore the relationship between postmodern theory and the problems I was scrutinising, with greater exposition. Similarly, the nature of my actual readership informed the way I approached the

²⁰ *Frontier: A Journal of Women's Studies* is a Feminist journal which specialises in intersectional and interdisciplinary writing with a particular interest in sexuality, race and transnationalism (all strong themes in Morrison)

²¹ The *African American Review* is a long running journal focused on African American contributions to the arts and culture publishing work from a wide variety of scholars including Morrison herself.

²² Bloom, Harold. *Toni Morrison's 'Beloved' (Bloom's Guide)*. New York, Infobase Publishing, 2004

²³ *Apogee* is a literary journal for fiction and non-fiction that aims "to publish fresh work that interrogates the status quo, and to provide a platform for underrepresented voices"

texts, focusing on textual mechanics rather than narrative elements. Considering language through neologisms, temporality, parody and self-referentiality as textual and narratological mechanisms demands little knowledge of the texts. Structuring the essay around these elements elevated non-narrative characteristics of the writing compared to dependence on a text-by-text, narrative-structured or character-structured essay that would demand greater familiarity with the novels.

I am pleased to see that my major work has focused upon a discrete but rich area of interest. *A Dangerous Artist* has evolved, but every stage contributed to the character of the thesis. The metric of success I nominated for my essay was to be able to apply a firm critical hand to Morrison's work while bending in approach and form to the unique demands that her work poses. In exploring Morrison's concepts of authorship and readership while problematising my own critical standpoint, I believe I explore my concept of author-reader relationships while lauding a writer of noble politics and astounding skill.