# MIDWESTERN MISCELLANY XVIII

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*edited by*
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in honor of
Jim Harrison

## PREFACE

*Midwestern Miscellany* XVIII ranges widely over the Midwestern cultural past as it examines the contributions of both little-known Midwesterners as diverse as Elihu Washburne and John Herrmann and the Midwestern dimensions of such well-known writers as Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison, both of whose Midwestern connections are too frequently ignored or forgotten.

Yet intrinsic to the subject matter, whether work or works or person, of each of the five essays included is the ultimate importance of place as environment and as molding force as it relates to the focal point of the essay and to the essence of Midwestern recognition. That this work is inscribed to Jim Harrison, poet and novelist of that place defined by Sherwood Anderson as his own "Mid-America," is therefore particularly appropriate, as is his designation as winner of the Mark Twain Award for 1990.

November, 1990 DAVID D. ANDERSON

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# MAINE'S GIFT TO THE MIDWEST: ELIHU WASHBURNE

Royce E. Flood

During the last one hundred fifty years, numerous inhabitants of northern New England—including the author—have migrated to the Midwest in search of fame and fortune. Of these seekers after wealth and place, few have been more successful than the seven sons of Israel and Patty Washburn of Livermore Falls, Maine. Among them, these seven brothers produced one United States Secretary of State, two ambassadors, one senator, two governors, four members of Congress, a general, an admiral, the founder of the Gold Medal Flour Company, and the president of the Hallowell, Maine, state bank.

The purpose of this article is to explore the life and career of perhaps the most successful of these prodigies: Elihu, the third son. In his life we may see reflected many of the trends and movements in America of the mid-nineteenth century: the westward migration, the emergence of outstanding American personalities, the resolution of the nation's great divisive crisis, and the development of the country as a respected power on the international scene. This examination is especially appropriate since Elihu's rise paralled and was closely tied to the rise of the American Midwest.

Elihu Benjamin Washburn (Benjamin was his mother's maiden name) was born at his family's farm, The Norlands, in Livermore, Maine, on September 23, 1816. He received the usual schooling at the local elementary and secondary academies. During his adolescent years he developed a deep interest in journalism which he never totally lost, for although he did not pursue a newspaper career, in his retirement years he returned to writing and produced a number of respectable historical works. In 1833

Elihu went to work for the *Christian Intelligencer*, of Gardner, Maine. Although he enjoyed the work, this small struggling Universalist publication was unable to pay him a living wage. Consequently, in the winter of 1834-5, he accepted a job keeping the district school at Hartland, a small town on the Maine frontier.

While Elihu was to look back on his brief career as an educator with little pleasure, his ability to handle an emergency, which would surface again and again throughout his life, was already evident. The story is best told in his own words.

> I . . . tried to get the good will of the scholars, particularly the big boys, but it was not long before I saw symptoms of a revolt and it was evident that we had got to try titles. I prepared myself with quite a formidable "ruler" in view of an emergency. One day in the class one of the largest and worst boys became insolent and showed fight. Without ceremony or motive I hit him a tremendous crack in the head which shivered the ruler to atoms. The whole school looked on with amazement. the fellow sneaked off to his seat and from that moment on I never had the least trouble and all went on smoothly.[1]

Happy to be rid of his handful of hellions, young Washburn gratefully accepted, in March, 1835, a position on a struggling pro-labor journal, the *Working-Man's Advocate,* in the coastal city of Belfast. His gratitude lasted about six weeks, which was the period of his employment; the paper soon failed. Washburn was not long without a job, however, for in May he managed to apprentice himself to the *Kennebec Journal,* the leading newspaper in Augusta, the state capital. His joy at being in the center of political activity was unfortunately short lived. He suffered a hernia from lifting the heavy typefaces and was medically disqualified from further typesetting work.

Disappointed, but undaunted, Washburn turned his life in yet another direction. As he described it, "on Wednesday, April 6, 1836, I bid a final adieu . . . to printing, and went back to Kent's Hill Seminary. I had determined in my own mind upon another career—that of the *law.* But it required a long preparation before I could enter properly upon the state of that great profession."[2]

After completing a year's study at the Methodist-run preparatory school, during which time he also clerked with John Otis, a local lawyer, Washburn moved to Boston to attend Harvard Law School. Here he also associated himself with the firm of Derby and Andrews, one of the most prestigious in the city. During his year at Harvard, Washburn came into contact with a number of prominent New Englanders including Charles Devens, James Russell Lowell, Charles Peabody, William M. Evarts, Joseph Story, and Richard Henry Dana.[3] It was during this period, also, when Elihu changed the spelling of his last name, adding the "e" in imitation of his English ancestors. This affectation actually stood him in good stead, allowing him, once several of the family had become notable, to maintain a distinct identity.



Washburne's younger brother, Cadwallader, had already left New England, the first of the family to move to the Midwest. Believing that the frontier offered greater opportunities for inexperienced advocates than his settled and possible over-lawyered native region, Elihu determined to join his brother in Illinois. Consequently, in March, 1840, having passed the bar exam on his second try, he turned his face to the west.

Elihu arrived at his brother's home in Stevenson (now Rock Island), Illinois, in late March. Feeling, perhaps, that one Washburn in the small settlement was enough, Cadwallader urged his brother to seek a career further up-river where the newly-opened lead mines had created the burgeoning town of Galena. Elihu accepted the advice as reasonable and wasting not a minute took steamer to the north. Arriving in his new home on April Fool's Day he acquired lodging and hung out his shingle as a lawyer five days later.

Like many frontier boom towns, Galena was a rather rough and tumble place with individuals to match—a marvelous opportunity for a young lawyer willing to work and perhaps occasionally to turn a blind eye to some of his clients's faults of character. Washburne's practice rapidly expanded. He was aided in his advancement by an association with Charles Hempsted, the town's leading lawyer. Although intellectually brilliant, Hempsted was the victim of paralysis and required the assistance of a younger colleague to handle the physical side of the practice. This partnership proved eminently satisfactory and successful for both men, so much so that Hempsted took an interest in young Washburne's personal welfare and helped him find a wife. The young woman was Adele Gratiot, a member of a family of French descent long settled in the St. Louis area, and a distant relative of Hempstead's. Elihu and Adele were married in July

of 1845, and the union proved a long, happy, and fruitful one. The couple had seven children and Adele's French ancestry proved invaluable when Washburne became ambassador to France. More immediately, the Gratiot family were friends with Thomas Hart Benton and when Washburne went to Congress he was greatly aided by the Missourian's sponsorship.

Washburne's entry into politics occurred soon after his arrival in Galena; indeed, some sources report that he made a political speech within a month of stepping off the boat.[4] Following the dominant strain of thought in his native New England, he allied himself with the Whig Party. It is clear that by the mid-1840's Washburne was power in local politics, for he was elected as a delegate to the Whig national convention in Baltimore in 1844. There he apparently impressed the leaders of the party—so much so that he was assigned to place the name of Henry Clay in nomination for the presidency. Four years later, in 1848, Washburne himself sought elective office, running for the district's seat in the House of Representatives; this initial quest proved unsuccessful, but in 1852 the voters responded more favorably to his campaign. This was the start of a congressional career which lasted for sixteen straight years and was not even interrupted by a change of party. When the Whigs self-destructed in the mid-1850's over the issue of slavery, Washburne followed many of his compatriots into the new Republican Party.

Washburne's service in the House was marked by several salient features. First, he developed a considerable reputation as an orator and the other members are recorded as having generally given careful attention when he rose to speak. Second, he was noted as a defender of the particular interests of his section. For instance, Washburne greatly favored the westward expansion of the railroads; he strongly advocated federal sponsorship of such projects as the granting of land to the railroad companies for right-of-way. He believed that this greatly improved transportation system would open up new areas of the West to settlement and would offer farmers easier access to markets. On the other hand, he remained highly suspicious of the motives of many of the railroad barons; thus he firmly opposed the granting of huge blocks of land to the railways, urging instead that such land should be reserved for new settlers. In this connection he was an early advocate of a federal homesteading act, proposing such a plan as early as 1857. When the Homestead Law was finally enacted five years later, Washburne was one of its leading supporters.



Washburne also achieved a position of leadership in the House and was rewarded with the chairmanship of several important committees, among them the Committee on Commerce and the Committee on Appropriations. His zeal in the latter post resulted in considerable savings for the government and earned him the title, "Watchdog of the Treasury."[5] Finally, after having viewed the carnage of the Civil War, Washburne came to believe that the nation should set aside special resting places for its fallen. Consequently he was the sponsor of the bill which created our system of national cemeteries.

One of the most interesting aspects of Washburne's political career was his long and intimate association with Abraham Lincoln. The two apparently met for the first time during the winter of 1843-4 when, as young lawyers, both were in attendance at the session of the Supreme Court of Illinois. They renewed their acquaintance in July of 1847 during the Whig state convention in Chicago. Apparently a rather firm friendship was established, because during the next winter, when Washburne was in Washington to try a case before the United State Supreme Court, he lodged with Lincoln, who was then a Whig representative in Congress.

Both moved at about the same time into the Republican Party, and Washburne was a strong supporter of Lincoln in the famous Senatorial campaign of 1858. Two years later Washburne was a delegate of the Republican national convention in Chicago and he was the speaker who placed Lincoln's name in nomination. Washburne no doubt felt intense satisfaction in serving as one of the tellers in the House when, on February 13, 1861, the official electoral vote was counted and his friend and political ally was declared the President-elect of the United States.

There followed one of the more dramatic events in Washburne's life, which was hardly marked by boredom in any case. The election of Lincoln, of course, caused immense excitement throughout the country and especially in Washington where a significant part of the populace was Southern in sympathy. Rumors of attempts to keep the new President from taking office and even of assassination conspiracies began to circulate on the streets. As a result, it was deemed wise for Lincoln to

enter the city unobtrusively. He actually did so on a night train from Baltimore, arriving in the wee hours of the morning of February 24, 1861. There to meet him—indeed, the only public official to greet him on his entry into the capital—was Elihu Washburne. He escorted Lincoln safely to his temporary lodgings.

Washburne, as a Congressman of growing seniority, played a fairly significant role in the conduct of the Civil War. On the advice of one of his constituents, he recommended a fellow Galenan, a West Point graduate named Ulysses S. Grant, to be a colonel of volunteers. Later, when Grant's military abilities were more firmly established, Washburne was one of the first to urge that he be brought East to replace the hesitant General McClellan. As a leading member of Congress, Washburne made fairly frequent visits to the front on fact-finding missions. His most noted such trip came in April, 1865, when he actually was present at the surrender of Robert E. Lee at Appomattax. Washburne penned his observations on what he had witnessed.

> Wednesday, April 12, 1865: I make this memorandum on the piazza of the house where all the capitulation papers were signed. For hours the rebel prisoners have been filing in front of the door, having laid down their arms. They are marching off under command of their officers; they are a terrible looking set.
>
> * * * *
>
> The house where the surrender was made is owned by Wilmer McLean who had lived here for two years.

Less than a week later the nation was thrust into deep mourning. Lincoln's death was a terrible blow, both personal and political, for Washburne. He accompanied the funeral train back to Springfield and was one of the pallbearers when the Great Emancipator was laid to rest. The following year Washburne was chairman in the House of Representatives of the Committee on Arrangements for the memorial ceremony to the late president which was held on February 12, 1866, featuring George Bancroft as the speaker of the day.[7]

Following Lincoln's death Washburne initially supported the new president, Andrew Johnson, but soon came to feel that the Tennesseean was betraying many of the principles for which the war had been fought. Thereafter he became an increasingly shrill opponent of the administration until, as Hunt has written, "in phrasing violent abuse of Andrew Johnson . . . Elihu Washburne deserved one of the prizes."[8] Washburne took a leading role in the House's vote for impeachment proceedings against the president.



Although both men had lived in Galena, Washburne had not met Grant before the Civil War. Once a relationship was established, as with Lincoln, it became a close and advantageous one. Washburne supported Grant's advancement during the war and was an early advocate of the Grant-for-president movement. Indeed, Grant learned of his nomination while visiting the Washburne home in Galena; a special telegraph wire had been laid into the living room so that both men could have immediate access to news from the convention.

Washburne was Grant's first choice for Secretary of State; unfortunately, failing health made it impossible for Washburne to accept the post permanently. Nevertheless, his name was submitted to Congress, he was confirmed, and he actually served for a few days before forwarding his resignation. It was Washburne's intention to travel in Europe for his health and Grant saw no reason why the trip could not be turned to the nation's advantage. Consequently he appointed Washburne as ambassador to France. Washburne took up his post during the summer of 1869 and remained in Paris for eight years.

While Washburne was seldom the cause of the momentous events which seemed to occur whenever he arrived on the scene, he nevertheless does seem to have been involved in more than his share of the vital moments of history. This remained true of his time in Europe. Within a year of his arrival in Paris, the Franco-Prussian war broke out and was quickly followed by the rising of the Paris Commune and the resultant seige of the city. When war between Germany and France appeared imminent, the German government approached Washburne, as representative of the great power most likely to be truly neutral, and asked him to take charge of their embassy and property and to see to the welfare of their nationals in Paris. Washburne carried out these duties with such faithfulness that he earned the permanent gratitude of Germany and of the German immigrant population of the American Midwest. At the time of his death nearly two decades later the German government requested permission to present a flag to be displayed during the funeral ceremonies.

With the defeat of French arms and the occupation of the capital by German forces, the basis was laid for the insurrection known to history as the rising of the Paris Commune. When the rebellion broke out most foreign notables fled the city. As Washburne noted, he was called upon for assistance precisely because he "was the only member of the Diplomatic Corps who remained in Paris during the reign of the commune. . . ."[9] His most noteworthy act during this trying time was his intervention on behalf of the venerable Archbishop of Paris, Monseigneur Darboy, who had been arrested by the communards as an enemy of the people. Washburne visited the prelate on several occasions and found the older man, in spite of the precarious position in which he had been placed, invariably cheerful and friendly. Washburne was much impressed and, much later, recorded his feelings.

> My saddest memories of the seige and commune of Paris are connected with the terrible fate of the pious and excellent man. Even now after fifteen years have elapsed, I cannot think of him without emotion. He was a man of the noblest character, educated, scholarly and refined, and of a sweet and charming disposition. It was only to know him to love him. He was a friend of the poor and the lowly and all his life he "went about doing good," and illustrated in his daily work and conversation every Christian virtue.[10]

It is clear that Washburne deeply regreted his inability to prevent, in May of 1871, the tragic execution of the Archbishop.

When Washburne returned to the United States in 1877, his public service was virtually at an end. His name was put forward in 1880 as a possible presidential nominee and he actually received forty-four votes at the convention, but no boom developed and he soon dropped out of the balloting. This episode produced one unfortunate result: an estrangement between Washburne and Grant. The former president was apparently still harboring hopes of a third term and he regarded Washburne's allowing his name to be placed in nomination as a form of disloyalty. The breech between the two was never really healed.

Washburne spent the last decade of his life in retirement in Chicago. He took a special interest in historical affairs, serving as president of the Chicago Historical Society and reading several papers before its meetings. He composed the article on "Illinois" for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, wrote his own memoirs, and produced some family genealogies. He revived his earlier interest in journalism and maintained a close friendship with Joseph Medill, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*.



Washburne's life came to an end in 1887. Adele, his wife of over forty years, passed away in the spring of that year; already in poor health, he was stricken by the loss. He lingered on until fall and died on October 23, 1887. He is buried in Galena.

Very few Americans today know the name—and even fewer are familiar with the career—of Elihu Washburne. This is most unfortunate, not only because the man himself deserves to be remembered, but because he epitomized in his own life the growth and development of his country. His life was filled with drama, controversy, and success, and everywhere he went he touched the great men and the great events of his time. The life of Elihu Washburne, it seems, would best be served up on the grand dramatic canvas of a major motion picture or of a television miniseries.

Butler University

NOTES

1. Elihu Washburne, *Autobiographical Sketch* (written at Karlsbad, Bohemia, unpublished), 1874.*
2. *Ibid.**
3. During his time at Harvard, Washburne kept a daily journal in which he recorded his views of the professors, the courses and his fellow students. Some of the last are remarkably unpleasant and even savage. Witness his entry for Friday, October 22, where he describes Richard Henry Dana.

   > His head is covered with long, course, shaggy hair like that on the head of a buffalo, which hangs down over his coat collar. His face is void of all expression of intelligence, dignity or decency. He is haughty, overbearing, conceited and supercilious, mean, ungentlemanly and offensive. His appearance is foppish, disgusting, and vulgar in the extreme.

   Many of the others entries are similarly harsh.*
4. Gaillard Hunt, *Israel, Elihu, and Cadwallader Washburn*, New York: MacMillan, 1925, p. 202.
5. Lillian Washburn, *My Seven Sons*, Portland, ME: Flamouth Publishing House, 1940, p. 106. See also, *Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 505.
6. Hunt, pp. 223-4.
7. *Official Program for the Memorial Service to Abraham Lincoln*, February 12, 1866.*
8. Hunt, p. 238.
9. Elihu Washburne, *Memoirs*, (unpublished manuscript), p. 456.*
10. *Ibid*, p. 455.*

Those sources marked (*) are available at the Washburn-Norlands Foundation Library, in Livermore, ME.

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# HOW IT PLAYED IN EMPORIA: THE WORLD ACCORDING TO WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

ROGER J. BRESNAHAN

Many years ago a self-educated man whose schooling had ended in the 6th grade told me he had derived most of his knowledge of the world beyond our isolated valley from reading the daily *New York Times*, the reprinted sermons of Harry Emerson Fosdick, and the reprinted editorials of William Allen White. Many Americans, deprived of further schooling, have taken their education from the *Times*. And Fosdick held one of the most prestigious pulpits in America. William Allen White was merely editor of a country newspaper in a backwater prairie town. Yet in the forty-nine years that White spent at the *Emporia Gazette* we can see him rise from the partisan journalism and local boosterism expected of the local press to national leadership on such issues as the Ku Klux Klan, the New Deal, free speech, and machine politics.

White's August 15, 1896, editorial, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" brought White to prominence in the national Republican party when Mark Hanna began using it as a campaign document. White bewailed the loss of population and wealth that Kansas had been experiencing and laid all the blame at the door of the Populists and the Democrats. Reprinted in the Chicago papers and then in the East, "What's the Matter with Kansas?" reached a circulation of 100,000 copies. That editorial invested White with a reputation as the spokesman for the Midwest among national magazines. Yet as Susan Foreman Griffith puts it in *Home Town News*, it "left White with a national reputation to live up to and a local one to live down." (p. 50)

White's transition from a McKinley Republican to a Progressive paralleled his growing admiration for Theodore Roosevelt's

vision of a politics that placed primacy on the public welfare. Griffith comments that Roosevelt's rhetoric of manliness "provided a moral language with which White could justify his emergence as a political and community leader, explain his break with his former political mentors, and resolve the personal tensions engendered by his ambitions. By fiercely attacking immorality at home and business exploitation abroad, he demonstrated his new Progressive identity." (93)

By 1905 the *Emporia Gazette* had become known as a reform journal solidly behind Roosevelt's trust-busting program. This support was largely brought on by White's own experience with short shipments from the International Paper Company, a trust that had wrapped up the newsprint business in 1898. When White instituted profit-sharing for the employees of the *Gazette*, Theodore Roosevelt commented that White was one person "who puts into practice the progressive principles he preaches." Because he always responded in a personal way to a public issue, he agonized over his railroad passes. In the *Autobiography* he relates that in an earlier era flashing his pass had made him a big man in the eyes of his fellow passengers. But once Roosevelt went after the plutocrats, "the eyes of my fellow passengers glared this message: 'Oh, look at the grafter; observe the dirty crook. We are paying his way'." (quoted by Griffith, 117)

From the most knowledgeable spokesman for the Middle West, he became, after his friend Roosevelt entered the White House, a much sought after commentator on national affairs. In 1906 White joined with Ida Tarbell and other *McClure's* staff members to purchase the *American Magazine* where he expounded the philosophy of community solidarity later reprinted in his book of essays entitled *The Old Order Changeth: A View of American Democracy* (1910). Here, as in his last volume of essays, *The Changing West: An Economic theory About Our Golden Age* (1939), he expounded views shaped, in part, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Human Work* (1904). He believed that the constantly moving frontier had made its own civilization based on rising land values. The steam engine and the unlimited corporation had resulted in a commercial empire that remained rural. White's interest lay in the spiritual and moral values that made the West a peculiar civilization, primarily love of liberty which gave rise to two powerfully symbolic free institutions—



the little white church and the little red schoolhouse. The first guarded the morals of the community. The second prevented the first from holding back material progress.

The effect of these two institutions in galvanizing community cohesion is, of course, White's principle text. As for the stultifying effects these two institutions could have, he acknowledged defects but believed, on the whole, that society was improving morally, politically, and economically. He considered the view expounded by his friend E. W. Howe in *The Story of a Country Town* merely a misplaced emphasis. White observed that the shortcomings of the small town seen in the novels of Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis were characteristics that the big cities shared in abundance. Indeed, it was country yokels who "furnish the raw material for the great Rube skinning industry by which New York holds first place among the cities of the earth." Irritated by H. L. Mencken's withering attacks on the Midwest, White responded in a 1922 editorial with a ferocity that must have startled even Mencken: "With a pig's eye that never looks up, with a pig's snoot that loves muck, with a pig's brain that knows only the sty, and a pig's squeal that cries only when he is hurt, he sometimes opens his pig's mouth, fanged and ugly, and lets out the voice of God—railing at the whitewash that covers the manure about his habitat."

White's editorials on state and national issues, reprinted throughout the country largely because he maintained the AP wire service for his part of Kansas, were broad-minded and provincial, at least until purified by the fight against the Klan. At the 1899 street fair which he inaugurated in the interest of local boosterism, he recruited several local black boys to pose as Filipinos, dressed only in loincloths and carrying corn-stalk spears. Even in his *Autobiography*, written years later, there is not a trace of chagrin about another incident at that first street fair—the "colored" section of the baby contest when the band played "All Coons Look Alike to Me." (322) And in the case of the war to end all wars, Susan Griffith observes that "White's insistence upon unity and service sanctioned the serious repression of individual liberties." (p. 184) While the war continued, he never lifted a finger to defend pacifist progressives like Jane Addams.

Despite the fact that he was a lifelong Republican, White became an avid supporter of Woodrow Wilson. Though he was

an entrenched isolationist, White, like other progressives, hoped the bloated federal bureaucracy made necessary by the war could be used to accomplish the progressive goals. Yet in the years between the wars the slogan that White had helped to popularize, "100 percent Americanism," was turned against domestic dissent. Then came about William Allen White's finest hour: his defense of free expression and his campaign to break the Ku Klux Klan.

When he ran afoul of his boyhood friend, Governor Henry J. Allen, and the Kansas Industrial Court's decree that even sentiments in support of striking workers were illegal, White finally came to understand that free expression is never so important as when it is under attack. When the Kansas Industrial Court was established to adjudicate labor disputes, picketing was made illegal. In 1921 railroad shop workers struck when the Santa Fe reneged on its wage agreement. Since the strikers could not picket, they printed signs and asked the merchants to post them in their windows. When White hung a sign in the window of his newspaper he was deemed to have violated the anti-picketing law. Allen maintained it was not a free-speech matter and issued a warrant for the arrest of his friend. Outside Kansas, White's action enjoyed widespread support, but inside the state the other newspapers pilloried him, and most fellow-Emporians thought he was crazy to get so worked up over a sign in the window.

In this heated state of affairs White printed the front-page editorial "To An Anxious Friend." Frankfurter, McAdoo, Borah, and Beveridge offered to defend him, and White hoped the case would go all the way to the Supreme Court. But the state attorney general declined to prosecute, bringing a denunciation of the governor for malicious arrest from the presiding judge. The next year, at the urging of Franklin P. Adams, a Pulitzer Prize went to White for his editorial. A powerfully concise statement on the necessity of free expression in a free society, it begins thus: "You tell me that the law is above freedom of utterance. And I tell you that you can have no wise laws nor free enforcement of wise laws unless there is free expression of the wisdom of the people—and, alas, their folly with it." One of White's biographers writes that it stands with Milton's *Areopagitica* "among the finest words ever written in English on the freedom of utterance." (Hinshaw, 232) In a later free-speech editorial in 1939 White praised Mayor



La Guardia who, "half-Jew, gave police protection to the crowd of Jew-baiting Nazis who recently had packed Madison Square Garden," though the Nazis "in power would not have allowed La Guardia to have his say." Hailing La Guardia's act as "a fine thing in the American tradition," White declared that "What they said was terrible. But they were entitled to say it and present their case . . . So long as that principle is active, the flag will wave and no man will be in danger."

In fact, White had been defending free speech since 1900 when Stanford University, at the behest of Mrs. Stanford, fired a socialist professor. And in 1910 he denounced those who would imprison Eugene V. Debs for his opinions: ". . . If Mr. Debs were clapped in jail, if free speech were denied the men who see things differently from the average man, even men who see things red, and who see things dead wrong, the country would suffer." In 1921 J. R. Burton, head of the Non-Partisan League was prevented from speaking in Barton County, Kansas. White, who detested everything Burton stood for, called that an "un-American outrage worthy of the Germans in Belgium." When the next year another speaker for the Non-Partisan League was run out of Salina by the American Legion, White called it "lynching free speech."

In the '20s, when the Klan became popular in Kansas, White led all other editors in opposing it, even coming out against it before such leading anti-Klan organs as the *New York World*. To discourage Klan recruitment in Emporia, a town than already had Klansmen as the mayor and in the police department, White published the names of those attending a Klan convention. In 1924, since both candidates for governor were tainted by Klan patronage, he ran on a third-party ticket, the Independent Republicans, in order to place the Klan-issue squarely before the voters. Though he lost, he did get 150,000 votes—ten times the probable Klan membership in the state. In effect, one-fourth of the Kansas electorate had bolted their parties to stand with White in righteous indignation. In the editorial that declared his candidacy, White steamed: "The thought that Kansas should have a government beholden to this hooded gang of mass fanatics, ignorant and tyrannical in their ruthless oppression, is what calls me out of the pleasant ways of life into this distasteful but necessary task." Though the objectives of the Klan were

abhorrent to him, their real menace was that they operated in secret: "If the Klansmen would wear buttons and make their membership public no one could seriously object to their propaganda. For in this country anyone has the royal right to make of himself as big as fool as his brains make him, and if wearing shirttails and waving fiery crosses is the thing he likes, then let him go to it. But secrecy in membership begets tyranny and tyranny begets brutality, and so wherever the Klan thrives brutality and cowardly tyranny thrive."

White was always clear-headed about prejudice. He believed that "to make a case against a birthplace, a religion or a race, is wicked un-American and cowardly." When a black student at the University of Kansas won a place on the debate team in 1907, white students boycotted the team's performances. White's editorial presages Martin Luther King, Jr. when he writes, "the color of a man's skin is of no importance, if the color of his brain is good and gray." And he added, "A few miserable flukes like that will make Kansas people wonder whether they are educating thoroughbreds or scrubs at their big state school." His 1908 editorial concerning Oklahoma's new Jim Crow laws suggested they "classed her with Mississippi and other semi-barbarous southern states." And when young black women were harrassed by White men in an Emporia city park, White lashed out at his fellow citizens: "There are men in this world so mean and low down that when they all die and are rounded up, the devil will have to establish a segregated district in hell so as not to contaminate the ordinary run of thieves and murderers and liars and house-burners entrusted to his care."

Likewise, he opposed the red-baiting activities of the D.A.R. In return, he was blacklisted by those "tea-gladiators" and linked their intolerance to that of the Ku Klux Klan. Though White rarely wrote an attack on another person, preferring instead to criticize policies or institutions, he made an exception in the case of Mrs. Alfred Brosseau, president-general of the D.A.R., whom he describes as "a lovely lady with many beautiful qualities of heart and mind, but in her enthusiasm she has allowed several lengths of Ku Klux nightie to show under her red, white, and blue."

In the closing years of his life William Allen White distrusted FDR's broad smile. He noted that the liberal coalition that elected him was comprised of six factions that had little in common: "old-time Southern Democrats, northern urban Negroes, western farmers, militant middle-class liberals, a distinct labor group with proletarian consciousness, and the tammanies of all the great cities." But as early as 1933 he had warned his fellow-Republicans that certain issues had to be dealt with by legislation: unemployment, poverty on the farm, exceptionally high tariffs, legalizing strikes, old-age pensions, and consumer control of public utilities. Roosevelt's NRA he considered "cock-eyed, pug-nosed, hump-backed, slather-mouthed and epileptic," but he gave it his blessing. "She is no beauty," he counselled, "but gentlemen, she has a heart of gold and good intentions, which should count for something in this wicked world."



Though he did not wholly disapprove of the scheme to pack the Court, he feared a "less benevolent dictator" could use the precedent against the public interest. He warned his fellow Republicans that once they regained the White House they would not be able to undo any of FDR's social legislation, nor did he want them to. As George Creel had accused him of being for Wilson every day but election day, so FDR quipped that William Allen White was with him three-and-a-half years out of every four. White had bolted the Republican party twice—in 1912 for the Progressive Party, and in 1924 when he ran for governor against the Klan. Yet he hated bolters, and so he remained a Republican in a party that offered him less and less. Of the New Deal he said the Constitution was "straining and cracking," but that, "after all, the Constitution was made for the people and not the people for the Constitution." Though he worried about FDR's Tammany connections, he knew also of the President's connection with Boss Pendergast's machine in Kansas City and had some notion of how corrupt that was. In effect, the man who earlier in his career had said, "Not every s.o.b. is a Democrat, but every Democrat is an s.o.b.," had become a reluctant Roosevelt Republican.

The *Emporia Gazette* was a small-town version of the blatantly partisan press that flourished in late 19th and early 20th century America. Its editor vigorously participated in the activities of his party at the state and national levels while using the *Gazette* as a party organ. Today's editors and publishers are expected to be more even-handed. Despite the advances of telecommunications in our own time, instances of William Allen

White's sort of influence are very rare and seldom lasting. Today, perhaps, a journalist of William Allen White's talent would be lured away to the larger metropolitan dailies or to the news magazines or the major networks or the public relations staff at the White House. S. S. McClure tried on numerous occasions to hire White, but White so valued his own editorial freedom that he would not work for another. What most attracted him was "the royal American privilege of living and dying in a country town, running a country newspaper, saying what we please when we please, how we please and to whom we please." *Judge* paid him $1,000 a month to write its editorials, but he quit before the year was out because he couldn't have full editorial freedom. And when McClure offered to set White up as editor of a new political journal in New York with complete editorial control, Sallie White put her foot down: they weren't going to live anywhere but Emporia. To preserve his editorial freedom, White even refused syndication, though it might have made him a lot of money. And so his editorials, put out on the AP wire, were quoted freely throughout the country. In addition, he contributed viewpoint pieces to specific publications, over which he maintained full editorial control.

William Allen White edited the *Emporia Gazette* for forty-nine years. Long after most of his editorials have passed into oblivion, many Americans still know him as the author of "Mary White," a touching portrait of his teenage daughter's accidental death and funeral. And journalism students still know, or should know his Pulitzer Prize editorial on freedom of expression, "To An Anxious Friend." And, less consciously, editors everywhere print editorials on the arrival of spring or the qualities of community that retain the indelible imprint of a genre he practiced so well—the homey sketches of small-town life that were often reprinted in *The Ladies Home Journal, The Saturday Evening Post, Collier's* and *McClure's.*

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# JOHN HERRMANN, MIDWESTERN MODERN: PART ONE

DAVID D. ANDERSON

In August 1932 the second annual Scribner's Prize contest, with its concomitant $5,000 award, was shared by two productive and promising thirty-two year-old American writers: Thomas Wolfe of Asheville, North Carolina, and Brooklyn for "A Portrait of Bascom Hawke" and John Herrmann of Lansing, Michigan, and Erwinna, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, for "The Big Short Trip." Wolfe had already, in the words of the *New York Times Book Review* "bestrode American letters like a Colossus" with the publication of his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929).

In the remaining six years of his life he would become an almost legendary and Gargantuan figure in modern American literature, and in spite of the vagaries of literary and critical fashion the legend of Thomas Wolfe if not a perception of the worth of his work endures.

John Herrmann, too, had already published a first novel, *What Happens?* (1927), but unlike Wolfe's, it had been published in Paris by Robert McAlmon as one of his Contact editions; nevertheless, it brought him more notoriety than fame or money. Copies were seized by U.S. Customs at New York on grounds of obscenity, and after a flurry in the courts and the papers, the copies were ordered destroyed. In spite of protests by H. L. Mencken, Heywood Broun, Babette Deutch, Harry Hansen, and others, the orders were carried out; the novel was neither reviewed nor distributed in the United States, and it quickly passed into the obscurity in which it remains. Although Herrmann was to write two more full-length novels, *Summer is Ended* (1932) and *The Salesman* (1939), and a number of shorter works, the fate of *What Happens?* was prophetic of the fate of Herrmann's





literary career and the course of his literary reputation. Unlike Wolfe, Herrmann was about to redirect the course of his life, and in the process to preclude all but the slightest possibility of a serious or successful literary career. He passed into an obscurity that was caught up in the secret events of the mid-1930s that were, in turn, made notoriously public in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and that, combined with circumstances, international conspiracy, partisan politics, scandal, espionage, and national and international notoriety, swept John Herrmann out of both the national consciousness and literary history as surely as if he had never lived, even as they directed an obscure California Congressman named Nixon to the Presidency.

John Herrmann, who was introduced to the members of the Society and to me by William McCann in a brief essay, "Lansing's Forgotten Novelist of the Lost Generation," in the *SSML Newsletter*, Summer, 1981, was born in Lansing, Michigan, in 1900. His grandfather, John Herrmann, had come to Lansing from Ober Hessen, Germany in the mid-nineteenth century to found a prosperous tailoring business, John Herrmann's Sons, later run by John's father, Herman, and his uncle, Christian, and a staunch conservative Republican dynasty. His mother was from what he later described as "old Pennsylvania and Dutch stock." Like most prosperous small-city Midwestern families of the time—like, for example, the Dr. Clarence E. Hemingway family of Oak Park, Illinois—the family spent the winters at home, where John attended Lansing High School, and the summers in Northern Michigan, where John swam, fished, and sailed, an experience that later, in the late twenties and early thirties, forged a brief, alcoholic bond between him and Ernest Hemingway, the older by a year. In his mid and later teens John worked one summer as a swimming instructor and then, after that, as a traveling salesman for jewelry, books, and garden seeds.

This and later similar experiences were to provided the substance of his best work, including "The Big Short Trip" and *The Salesman*, his last novel, published in 1939, as well as a profession to which he was to return on occasion in later years. After high school, where he debated and worked for the Lansing *State Journal*, and the end of World War I, he went to Washington, D.C. to study law, but instead became a newspaper correspon-

dent, "for several months," in his words, "the youngest member of the Press Gallery."

He worked again as a traveling salesman and then attended the University of Michigan, where he starred as Henry Higgins in the Comedy Club production of Shaw's "Pygmalion."

He left Michigan to study in Munich and then wandered to Vienna and then to Paris to write, where, on an April afternoon in 1924, seated at a table in the *Cafe du Dome* in *Montparnasse,* he was seen, in the midst of a hangover, saucers piled high on his table but still the handsomest man she'd ever seen, by thirty-two-year-old—but twenty-seven on her passport—Josephine Herbst of Sioux City, Iowa, Berkeley, California, New York, and now of Paris, dedicated feminist, new woman, and despiser of marriage.

They learned that they had much in common: both were unpublished but determined novelists; both were at odds with family values; both had come out of the Midwest like dozens of their contemporaries determined to take the literary and intellectual world by storm. John, Josie noticed, although not yet with alarm, threatened to drink more than he wrote; unaware of her affair with Maxwell Anderson and subsequent abortion in 1920, John thought she was unlike any woman he had ever met—and certainly not "silly" like the girls in Lansing. The two would be together—when they were not apart through circumstances of John's unfaithfulness—for brief periods, until late 1934; married on September 2, 1926, in New York, they were divorced in 1940 in Arkansas after six years of separation. The depth of Josie's continued feeling for John is most evident in her visits to his grave in Mt. Hope Cemetery in Lansing after his death in 1959 and long after their relationship ended. As late as 1969, 35 years after its end, and not long before her own death, she made a special trip for a visit.

During the six months after they met they lived and worked together and apart in Paris; they traveled, including an idyllic stay at *Le Pouldus* in Brittany. Josie had already published in *Smart Set;* John worked on and published in *transition;* each worked on a novel; John's *What Happens?* was the reflection of his youthful relationships with women; Josie's *Unmarried,* later called *Following the Circle,* was based on her more mature experiences with men, including Maxwell Anderson. In Paris they spent evenings together in the cafes with Robert McAlmon,



Claude Mackay, Ernest Hemingway, and others. In the background, John's Lansing sweetheart, who had followed him to Paris, hovered relentlessly, determined to bring him to his senses and back to Lansing; Josie was as determined to keep him—and to keep both of them free.

With the manuscripts of both their novels nearly completed, they decided to return to New York that Fall to seek publishers. John, depressed, briefly thought about returning, with his Lansing sweetheart, to Michigan and respectability, perhaps opening a bookstore and writing on the side, but Josie, much more ambitious and stronger than he, talked him out of it. They sailed for New York in October, 1924; both of them were broke, and for both of them expatriation was over.

In New York John made the rounds of the publishers with *What Happens?,* while Josie returned to Sioux City to finish her novel. Unsuccessful, John returned to Lansing. Both of them became minor local celebrities, but both knew their futures—or chances of a joint future—were uncertain. John finally took a job in a Detroit bookstore, the basis of *Summer is Ended,* where Josie, unhappy, visited him and found him unfaithful. But she determined that they would be together and write in rural Connecticut. In the Fall of 1925 they were, in a $6.00-a-month house in the town of New Preston.

Where the money came from for the move is uncertain; John had neither earned nor saved enough in the bookstore, and his parents had not helped at that point, nor would hers. Josie's biographer, Elinor Langer, hints at blackmail: indiscreet letters "sold" back to Maxwell Anderson, already a success with *What Price Glory?*, who had earlier refused to pay for her abortion. The letters have disappeared, if they ever existed.

In Connecticut, they wrote. John sold a satirical short piece, "Dry Sunday in Connecticut," about their neighbors and Prohibition experiences, to the *American Mercury.* In the meanwhile Robert McAlmon decided to publish *What Happens?* in Paris, while Josie abandoned *Unmarried,* after having extensively rewritten it in Sioux City. The former version had the liberated female protagonist taking sex from whatever men she fancied at the moment, as men had been doing for a millenium; the newer, more idealistic version had the protagonist leaving a sanitorium at the end, restored, and determined to find meaning in her life.

In Connecticut Josie began *Nothing is Sacred,* based on her recent Sioux City experiences, which was to be published by Coward-McCann in 1928.

The two first novels, one unpublished and abandoned, the other published, suppressed, and forgotten, bear a measure of comparison at this point. Both were clearly and intensely autobiographical, capturing, in both cases, the new freedom and the new morés of the 1920s. John's is that of the young American male who discovers sex at the same time as the young women of his age also discover it, and they enjoy it together. The book is less frank than it is suggestive, and it is a weak book; as McAlmon described it, it is "boyish" as well as "a naively innocent work." In spite of later comparisons to Hemingway and Anderson, it, like its successor *Summer is Ended,* remains an adolescent work; his best work was to be in the short story and novella.

Herbst's *Unmarried* in the first version is cynical rather than naive and a statement of ideology rather than discovery; in the second version, the cynicism is tempered, but it remains the work and the story of a determined woman demanding freedom rather than a coltish boy revelling in his freedom. Both, however, are clearly apprenticeship novels.

In Connecticut John had written the novella *Engagement,* later published in the second *American Caravan* in 1928, and begun a novel called *Woman of Promise.* That summer, of 1926, John approached his father for money; Henry Herrmann responded with a check for $1,000. However, the letter from him that followed almost immediately, dated July 18, 1926, on the letterhead of John Herrmann's Sons, is worth repeating entirely:

> Dear John
>
> Since arriving home last Saturday evening and sending you the check we have learned of things which have shocked your mother and me very much. Your mother has had suspicions of your actions but has had no definite evidence until she found some letters which lead us to believe that you have been living unmarried with a woman. This was going on while you were abroad and has been going on since you left Detroit and living at New Preston. We learned through an attorney how you are living and other things concerning you and have evidence to substantiate our information.



> I immediately stopped payment on the check and will absolutely not back you while you are living as you have been. It would be aiding and condoning a moral and civil crime to do so and you know very well you are liable to the law for your conduct. You will have to either marry the woman or quit her immediately and while the woman in this affair is no better or worse than the man, yet no one would want to harbor such a person or have anything to do with her. Get a job at honest work and quit or marry, and if you write any smutty stories please have enough consideration for me not to sign your name to them.
>
> Any time you can show me that you have gotten to honest work and decent living I shall be willing to back you to the best of my ability but to think that your mother and I have worked hard these many years and deprived ourselves of many things with the view of bringing up our children to be decent, honorable and useful citizens, and then have developments of this kind brought to our knowledge is extremely distressing.
>
> I hope you will let me hear from you soon and that you have enough character to turn away from the path of vice and vagabondage upon which you appear to have a considerable start.
>
> Your Father.
>
> P.S. I mailed you a thin summer suit recently.

Josie, who was later to use the incident and letter thinly disguised in *Executioner* (1934) commented that in his father's view John "has done nothing right since he got out of knickers," according to Elinor Langer, and they were forced to move back to New York and John to go to work as a book salesman on the road while Josie worked with a research organization. But there was a significant difference in their relationship: whether in deference to John's parents or to some semblance of respectability for their employers or perhaps as a sign of a permanent relationship, they married, but immediately after, in a moment of defiance, according to Langer, they tore the license into shreds and flushed it down a toilet. Langer sees this as the end of something important; their happiest time together, she insists, had been in Connecticut.

John traveled the northeastern quadrant of the country as a book salesman, an area that he later has the protagonist cover in "Big Short Trip"; at one point John stopped in Lansing and collapsed, but when he returned to New York in the Spring of

1927 they had some money saved. Then, in a trip to Boothby Harbor, Maine, John re-discovered, as Hemingway had also re-discovered elsewhere, the woods, the streams, and the lakes of the Upper Michigan of his youth. John and Josie rented a cabin, and John bought a decrepit ketch converted from a long boat, which he renamed the "Josy." The boat was, he insisted, more seaworthy than the Titanic. The result was a hectic, sometimes dangerous, often strained summer, but they were determined to sail the "Josy" back to New York in the Fall.

The trip, especially that across Casco Bay on August 23, 1927, was horrendous; finally, the leaky "Josy" was abandoned at Cohasset, never to be retrieved. They returned to New York, depressed, where they learned that Sacco and Vanzetti had been executed. The summer and the trip, however, produced some interesting short fiction, including Josie's "A Bad Blow" published in *Scribner's*, July, 1930, and John's "The Gale of August Twentieth," transposed to Northern Lake Michigan, where a valiant sailor struggles alone for survival. It was published in *Scribner's*, October 1931. Too, both of them combined the trip with the execution in other fiction, in John's "A Last Look Back," published in *Partisan Review and Anvil*, May, 1936, and in Josie's "A Year of Disgrace," published in *The Noble Savage* 3, 1961.

They returned to New York also to the excitement and frustration of the banning and burning of *What Happens?*, and John returned to the road in November, 1927, while Josie took a job as a reader for Dell Publishing. Early in 1928, while John was on the road, Josie found the stone farmhouse in Erwinna, Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that she wanted for their permanent home. With neither electricity nor plumbing nor telephone, it was a place in which to write and to be alone. Later in the Spring, with the $2,500 cost advanced by John's father—there were, after all, some advantages to marriage—they bought the house and fifteen acres. It was to be their home for little more than five years, but Josie's to the end.

Josie's *Nothing is Sacred* was published in the fall of 1928. It was well-received, winning her a measure of literary celebrity in more than fifty favorable reviews but little money, and *Money for Love*, which followed in 1929, was almost as well received but sold fewer than 100 copies.



The two writers collaborated on a fictionalized prohibition incident, "Pennsylvania Idyll," published in *The American Mercury* in 1929; about that time, in the Spring of 1929, they embarked an a four-month, seven-thousand mile trip by car to the Pacific Northwest. On the return they stopped in Michigan and were, at least temporarily, reconciled with John's family.

On their return to Erwinna, they found few royalties from Josie's work, and John's novel *Woman of Promise* was still in search of a publisher. John returned to the road. In December they drove furiously to Sioux City to Josie's father's funeral, and then John returned again to the road. Finally, exhausted, they determined to seek the sun in Key West. There they were reunited with Hemingway, who was basking in the success of *A Farewell to Arms*. They met his new wife, they fished, and they talked. The success of the visit made them resolve to return the next year, in early 1931.

However, before their return, significant events took place. John and Josie visited Russia in the fall of 1930, where they attended the International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov. Neither was a revolutionary, except against what they saw as middle class Midwestern morality, nor were they anything other than interested observers, but both of them were growing deeply concerned about the worsening farm crises in the Midwest and the increasingly evident effects of the deepening Depression. In little more than a month they returned to Erwinna, shocked by what they had seen in Warsaw and Vienna but moved by the promise of Moscow. Josie was impressed; John was converted. When they visited Hemingway in Key West early in 1931, the inevitable break happened between Hemingway and Herrmann. When they drove to Lansing that summer for the funeral of John's mother, John carried a card in his wallet that was inscribed CPUSA. On the verge of his minor success with the *Scribner's* award, perhaps at the beginning of a greater success, he had found a cause that was ultimately to replace both his relationship with Josephine Herbst and his literary career.

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# THREATENING PLACES, HIDING PLACES: THE MIDWEST IN SELECTED STORIES BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

MARGARET ROZGA

Joyce Carol Oates has employed numerous settings for her short fiction over the course of her twenty-five years as a publishing writer. Frequently she has chosen to set her stories in the location where she herself resided at the time of the story's composition. Thus having grown up in rural New York state, Oates often used rural settings for her earliest stories. But these rural settings are generic rather than specific; no actual places are named. Several early reviewers compared her settings and her characters to those of William Faulkner. Oates did, in fact, at first begin to establish her own fictional territory, Eden County.

Oates moved on, however, to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in Madison and later to teach at the University of Detroit. When she chose to write stories set in these locales, she did not fictionalize in the same way. Instead in this later group of stories, she names the actual cities, and, moreover, she names specific streets and sites in those cities. Despite this move toward the more realistic, place continues to play a symbolic function in her fiction. The economic and racial tensions that characterized the historic Detroit in the 1960's become important in Oates' fiction as reflections of widespread disintegration, personal as well as social. What Detroit means and what Oates has made of that meaning are perhaps fairly widely known through the reputation of her award winning novel *them* and through one of her most frequently anthologized stories, "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again." In this last named work, the city itself functions as the chief antagonist, a degree of intense emphasis on place not





equalled in many of the other stories. Nevertheless, something remains of that sense of place as working against the character's search for personal meaning and purpose.

With Madison, Wisconsin, and Detroit, Michigan, in particular, Oates suggests that the academic atmosphere in the one case and the social upheaval in the other inhibit the individual. In the academic atmosphere of Madison, Oates' protagonists take refuge in the intellectual and stunt their emotional growth. On the other hand, characters cast adrift in the social disintegration of Detroit experience such tumultuous and twisted emotion that their power of understanding on an intellectual level is overwhelmed. Only those are "saved" who find the equivalent of Madison in Detroit's universities or, what is more usual, find refuge in Detroit's suburbs.

Four stories illustrate with particular clarity how these Midwestern cities can be places of refuge or places of terror: "Expense of Spirit," "Sacred Marriage," "How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction," and "The Dead." Reference to a fifth story, "The Lady With the Pet Dog," may help in maintaining a balanced view. Though Oates looks critically at the cities in her Midwestern experience and fiction, she does not resort to stereotypes. The Midwest is not ridiculed as the ignorant, uncultured provinces. Unlike the famous Chekhov story to which hers is a counterpart, Oates's story has no wretched violins, no ugly grey fences. Ohio, the home of Oates's Anna, is not the S--- of Chekhov's heroine. The twentieth century American Midwest poses different challenges.

The challenge of Madison, Wisconsin, is to maintain a sense of wholeness in an atmosphere that may encourage intellectual development but does so in a way detrimental to the person. "The Expense of Spirit," from Oates's first collection of short stories, *By the North Gate*, is set at a graduate student party in Madison. It shows how grotesque human behavior can become when characters are isolated from ordinary human responsibilities and pursue intellectual goals to the neglect of other aspects of development. Leo Scott, surveying the apartment where the party is being held, wonders, "What would become of them all? Would leaving college jolt them overnight into becoming American citizens, thinking of house payments and cars and church—for the children, of course—and supermarket stamps to paste in books?" (182).

At the present time of the story, the characters face no such worries. Leo, in particular, has taken refuge in his role as scholar. The role, however, is not enough to protect him from the very real pain of his wife's leaving him. He goes to the party, desperate to find her, but instead is brought face to face with himself. The noise at the party escalates from the playing of "soft, thin, effeminate pieces" by Ravel on the piano to the drunken rebuff Gordie hurls at Leo, "What the hell are you looking at? I hate your goddam face!" (182). As more people arrive and more quarrels erupt, it is clear that behind the intellectual pretensions, chaos reigns.

In the midst of this din, Leo loses his hold on the personal image with which he had come to the party. "Watching himself in the mirror as he shaved, he had prepared his expression for his friends: he would appear to them as fresh, happy, perhaps even innocent." (180). In the midst of the confusion of attempted comfort and actual hostility at the party, Leo cannot long maintain that pose. Later he will turn to an external embodiment of the image of innocence in his student, Miss Edwards.

In the meantime, Leo locates another image for himself. He sees "exotic masks on one wall—three in a row. One of them reminded Leo of himself: a thin, drawn, dissipated face, with a sardonic grin implying a constantly present sense of irony that had choked off all other emotions, even self-pity." (181-182). As with the pose of innocence, however, Leo's attempt at the ironic or sophisticated cracks as soon as it is challenged. Leo attempts to banter with Claude, but Claude cuts Leo off, "If I were you I would not make qualitative judgments on anyone else. You are not the man for it." (183). There is no irony in Leo's reply: "What does that mean?" (183). Leo is angry enough to pour his beer over Claude's head, but he cannot bring himself to act at all. He cannot fulfill either of the images he picks out for himself. He is neither the innocent, nor is he the sophisticated ironist.

At this point, again with an escalation of noise and "commotion" (184), the two people arrive who fulfill these images. Miss Edwards, Leo's student, is only seventeen, and she exclaims in her excitement at being included in "faculty" circles. The graduate students all laugh at her naivete about their status. Jason, the Black graduate student who has brought her to the party, is from the start the ironist Leo would like to be. He explains to the girl the reason for the laughter in such a way so as to establish his own control over the situation: "'Oh, ain't she a princess!' he cried. 'Thinkin' they let the faculty teach ones young as her. Honey, it's dirt cheap labor that teaches you—ain't they 'splained that in the catalogue?'" (185). Leo attaches himself to the couple who represent the combination of innocence and irony he believes could save him from painful realities, even from himself. He finds some respite, at least temporarily, in Miss Edwards' chatter and in Jason's vodka.



The whole party, in fact, then centers itself about Jason and Miss Edwards and, for a time, tones down. Miss Edwards is allowed a long monologue on topics ranging from her excitement at being at the university to her belief in equality. When she finishes, the cynicism of the group, and the noise, begin to reassert themselves. Someone claps; Marty sticks out his tongue and says, "Christ" (187). Leo thinks again of his wife, of her in their bedroom mirror, but he cannot even imagine his reflection in that mirror, a sign of his growing realization that their marriage is over. Someone then brings home to Leo a cruel but accurate reflection. In a game of charades, the imitator wails, "But where's my wife?" (191). Leo is again paralyzed. Only Miss Edwards can respond; without any hesitation, she slaps the person playing charades and flees from the party. In her innocence, she knows her only possible response to such cruelty is to flee before she gets caught up in the larger charade of the party itself.

Jason and Leo follow after her, but as much a part of the Madison academic scene as they are, they bring chaos with them. The three struggle together, break free and struggle again. In a description that shows how he has internalized the noisy atmosphere of the party, Leo feels his "mind had emptied and was buzzing hollowly" (192-193). Leo's final position is desperate. He falls "to his knees in the cold street and embracing their legs, their bodies, as if he were terrified they might leave him." (193). Leo holds on to Jason and Miss Edwards as images of the self he thinks he needs to be to survive. The innocent can reject and flee from the ugly; the sophisticate can laugh it off. Leo can really do neither. The party at Madison presents a challenge to his sense of identity that he cannot meet. Whatever success he may have as a student and as a teacher does not translate into an ability to relate effectively with others.

Howard Dean in "Sacred Marriage" has advanced somewhat further in his academic career, but he has not advanced at all in an ability to come to terms with himself, and he is perhaps even further behind Leo in understanding others. When he fails in the end, defeated by a dead man, in both academic and human terms, he invents a self-protective purpose with which to shield himself from the failure, and he hurries back to Madison where his illusion may survive.

The illusion with which he concludes is the illusion with which he begins. Dean invests the dead poet Connell Pearce with power over him. In his initial letter to Pearce's widow Emilia, Dean had written, "Your husband has partly created me. Without his work I would not be the person I am." (*Marriages and Infidelities*, 17). But what sort of person is Dean, the scholar, the academic? Gradually, enough of his past is revealed that we have an impression. Dean admits to being frightened sometimes by his fiancee "who had not exactly promised she would marry him," (15) and frightened even of "her little girl, whose step father he might well become." (15). He feels that love is a "mysterious process. He had always felt himself apart from it, baffled and unable to control it." (29).

On the other hand, the poet whom he studies and whom he claims has shaped his life is the epitome of control. Pearce had even planned a very effective means to protect himself from scholars like Dean and Felix Fraser who arrives shortly after Dean himself. The main purpose of Pearce's marriage to Emilia seems to have been to leave behind a guardian of his unfinished work. So Dean concludes when he discovers Pearce's notes for a religious parable: "He is a noble, dying old man, she is a very beautiful young woman. *She* is worthy of being his wife. And therefore he marries her and she nurses him through his last illness, buries him, and blesses all the admirers of his art who come to her, for she alone retains X's divinity." (36).

The critic is aghast to find out the poet has been one step ahead of him and that he is just living out the story that the writer created. He is even more disturbed to find out that Emilia will live out the part created for her, though she seems to be unaware of how she is playing a part. She has no intention of marrying Dean despite their affair. Dean, in his depression, thinks that his is a "joke of a life." (38). The self-examination, however, is all too



short-lived. As he returns to the Midwest, he discards any disturbing thoughts and puts himself back in line with the life and goals he held before his experience in the exotic-sounding Mouth-of-Lowmoor, West Virginia:

> The sun rose. The fog burned away. Howard's depression burned away, gradually, and by the time he came to the Ohio state line at Marietta it was nearly gone. He felt instead the same marvelous energy he had felt upon first seeing those piles of Pearce's unpublished, unguessed-at-works. That was real. Yes, that was real, and whatever had happened to Howard was not very real. . . ." (38)

Thus Howard Dean seems to be concluding with a retreat into his academic role and a retreat from confrontation with himself and all his fears.

Torborg Norman advances the argument that Howard Dean leaves Pearce's home with enough insight to enter into a meaningful marriage with his previously feared fiancee back in Madison. Norman writes that "the real art in the Oatesian sense would lie in the transformation of the nervous fiancee to dream lover. (87). However desirable such a transformation might be, Howard Dean's concluding thoughts seem to preclude that happening. He resolves instead "to bring Connell Pearce to the world's attention: that was his mission, the shape of his life." (38). The fiancee has no explicit place in his concluding thoughts. He is going back to Madison as a place of narrow refuge.

Detroit presents quite a different kind of challenge to one's sense of identity and search for a full life. The narrator/protagonist in "Unmailed, Unwritten Letters" is perhaps the first to define the problem posed by Detroit: "In Detroit the multiplication of things is brutal. I think it broke me down. Weak, thin, selfish, a wreck, I have become oblivious to the deaths of other people." (*The Wheel of Love*, 61). Another fragmented narrative, also in *The Wheel of Love*, Oates' third collection of short stories, further develops this definition of Detroit. Detroit is the place of impending storms, threatening apocalypse because it presents more disorder than anyone can comprehend or deal with. Most people respond by shutting out whatever would disturb their superficial peace. The young narrator/protagonist, however, is driven by the atmosphere of the city to search for something she

cannot quite name. She catalogues the weather in such a way so as to suggest some of the forces at work: "small warnings of frost, soot warnings, traffic warnings, hazardous lake conditions for small craft and swimmers, restless Negro gangs, restless cloud formations, restless temperature aching to fall out the very bottom of the thermometer or shoot up over the top and boil everything over in red mercury." (155). The social climate, as well as the actual weather, is the disturbing quality about Detroit; social cohesion is tragically lacking. The undercurrent in Detroit's weather is the discontent of those who do not partake in the city's wealth. The narrator, a suburbanite herself, is made to feel the wrath of the dispossessed when she is beaten by Princess and Dolly in the lavatory of the Detroit House of Correction. Princess and Dolly typify the city which is dirty and dangerous and poor, except for Hudson's Department Store and Cobo Hall, "that expensive tomb" (162).

In the suburbs, on the other hand, is the boredom and vacuity of those with abundant possessions. Separated from the dirt and disorder of the city, suburbanites feel safe. Some of the narrator's thoughts capture and exaggerate this attitude. As she listens to the maid vacuum the carpet in her parents' room, for example, she thinks, "a vacuum cleaner's roar is a sign of all good things" (162). Beneath the clean surface, however, all is not perfectly in order. Some of the suburban young people shoplift, do poorly in school, or drift into the city, like the narrator, vaguely searching for more substantive reality. But they are inarticulate about what they seek. The narrator cannot answer the question posed by Clarita, the nondescript, city-conditioned woman who presents herself to the narrator, saying, "I never can figure out why girls like you bum around down here. What are you looking for anyway?" (152).

Whatever she seeks, what the narrator finds is abuse, violence and the rage of those kept from the good of suburban cleanliness. Princess and Dolly who beat her, help her understand the meaning of her experience. The moment of insight comes through with her switch from third to first person: "Why is she beaten up? Why do they pound her, why such hatred? Princess vents all the hatred of a thousand silent Detroit winters on her body, the girl whose body belongs to me, fiercely she rides across the Midwestern plains on this girl's tender bruised body . . . revenge on the oppressed minorities of America! revenge on the slaughtered Indians! revenge on the female sex, on the male sex, revenge on Bloomfield Hills, revenge, revenge. . . ." (161).



Though she has this moment of insight, the young narrator is unable to carry the weight she feels thrown at her. She cannot resolve the contradictions and discrepancies in the society represented by Detroit and its suburbs. She can only follow her parents back to Bloomfield Hills and to her pink bedroom where she weeps, haunted by the memory of what she experienced in the city. She is at the end similar to Leo Scott in "Expense of Spirit, clinging desperately to fragments, the illusion of a place of refuge having been destroyed. The image of her Detroit lover now superimposes itself on the presence of her father. Though she abandons the third person stance she has used for much of the story, her use of the first person does not carry with it any assurance of her personal stability or triumph. She weeps because the "God in gold and beige carpeting" (164) has no power to rescue or pull her world together into a coherent whole.

The brutal climate of Detroit reaches a deathly point in Oates' "The Dead." In this story Oates makes Detroit a place of literal death—the place where the student Emmett Norlan was beaten by the police during an anti-war demonstration and dies later in the hospital of liver failure; "he just disintegrated . . ." (406). It is the place where Ilena Williams' marriage dies, unable to survive the strain of her infidelity and her husband's bullying. It is the place where values die. Father Hoffman, head of the English Department at the small Catholic university in Detroit where Ilena taught is "a little corrupt in his academic standards: the Harvard years had been eclipsed long ago by the stern daily realities of Detroit." (*Marriages and Infidelities*, 392). His corruption costs Ilena her job. She is fired for refusing to agree to grant a degree to a master's candidate who cannot name a poem. She has enough sense of value left to be "astonished" that "anyone would allow him to teach English anywhere" (393). But the institutional and personal corruption around her takes its toll.

Ilena finds herself consuming whatever drugs she can get hold of. Her personal problems are intertwined with the larger social problems of Detroit. Ilena perceives the connection in these terms: "The marriage had been dwindling all during the Detroit years—1965-1967—and they both left the city shortly

before the riot, which seemed to Ilena, in her usual poetic, hyperbolic, pill-sweetened state, a cataclysmic flowering of their own hatred." (383). She seems aware of her exaggeration, and, at least as it applies to her marriage, other evidence in the story provides a more sober view. When, for example, her husband reacts scornfully to the idea of having children because, "You don't bring children into the world to fix up a rotten marriage," Ilena thinks that she had not known it was rotten, exactly." (383). It may also be that the cause and effect work as well in the opposite direction, the negative despairing attitude prevalent in the city twisting twisting the emotions of the characters and thus blighting their marriage.

At any rate, Ilena is able to survive the Detroit experience. Her artistic sense, and some distance from the city, allow her to survive both the personal and the social disorder. Drawing on the experience, she writes a novel, *Death Dance*. Though she considers it her weakest novel, it becomes a best seller and frees her from financial worries. More important, the act of writing keeps her suicidal thoughts at bay. She survives well enough to return to Detroit and re-encounters the faculty at her former university. Finally in the arms once again of her former lover, she is brought to a vision of a clean slate, if not a new start. Echoing the ending of James Joyce's story "The Dead," Oates concludes with Ilena hearing "beyond the man's hoarse, strained breathing the gentle breathing of the snow, falling shapelessly upon them all." (409).

If Detroit and Madison represent a Midwestern threat and a Midwestern avoidance of reality in particularly extreme and grotesque form, Ohio represents the Midwest in a more moderate way. Oates chooses Ohio as the twentieth century American counterpart to Anton Chekhov's provincial Russian town S---, each place depicted in the respective author's version of "The Lady With the Pet Dog." Oates does not make Ohio the obvious object of ridicule as Chekhov does with S---. Chekhov shows the stiffness and rigidity of nineteenth century Russia ensconced in S---. The orchestra playing at the theatre where Gurov meets Anna again is wretched; obvious badges indicate rank of patrons at the theatre; Anna's house is protected by an ugly grey fence studded with nails. But in Oates, the lovers meet again at a concert and no comment is made on the quality of the music performed. The middle-class status of Oates's Anna can be inferred from her large house, her leisure time and her husband's preoccupation with his work, but aside from knowing he has "business friends" and "a future" (331) we do not get any specific indications of rank. Her house is large and rambling, and, if it symbolizes anything, it is a quality opposite to that of the house of Chekhov's Anna. It symbolizes a society, a way of life in which lack of structure becomes an obstacle to finding oneself. At least this is Anna's perception: "her spirit detached itself from her and drifted about the rooms of the large house she lived in with her husband, a shadow-woman delicate and imprecise. There was no boundary to her, no edge." (330).



The Ohio setting of this story, then, shows the Midwest as more amorphous, without the specific threat of one-dimensional, academic distortion or the emerging hostility of deprived classes. This story, like "The Dead," offers some contrast between the Midwest and the Northeast. Oates's Anna meets her lover on Cape Cod, where she stays in another rambling house, that of her family which supplies her with no better sense of identity than the house of her husband. But amid the noise of the beach, she is defined by the man who will be her lover in the sketch he does of Anna as the lady with the pet dog. Anna carries the sketch and the newly awakened sense of self back to Ohio where she furtively and anxiously re-examines it, trying to make sense of the two halves of her life. She does not find it easy to come to terms with herself, and before she does she flirts with suicide. Finally she sees in her lover the possibility of maintaining a sense of individuality while being in love. Though she seems to find the most successful resolution of these characters, she does not face the test of jeering pseudo-friends, as did Leo Scott in "Expense of Spirit," or the disintegrating social fabric of Detroit in "The Dead." For Oates, Ohio is neither the threat nor the place of escape that Detroit or Madison seem to be.

The facts Oates presents about Detroit and Madison—Woodward and Livernois Avenues, State Street, the anti-war demonstrations and the 1967 riot are specifically and literally true in a way her portrayal of earlier fictional settings is not. But Oates draws out the symbolic dimension of the facts to create in these Midwestern stories a picture of a society with fatal divisions between the intellectual and the emotional, the rich and the poor, the young and questioning and the older and more established.

Her protagonists are sharply and sometimes painfully aware of the divisions. A few, like Anna in "The Lady With the Pet Dog," may find a measure of personal happiness, but the search for personal identity and a meaningful life is difficult for all of them. When such complications as a distorted, one-dimensional academic milieu or a disorienting social upheaval are added, the struggle defies success and Oates's characters do well to cling to their choices or imagine a new beginning as best they can.

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# TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* AND THE REVIEWERS

MARILYN JUDITH ATLAS

Even before the publication of *Beloved*, Toni Morrison was clearly a writer's writer. Toni Cade Bambara, author of *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Salt-Eaters*, herself an impressive crafter of fiction, wrote of Morrison's fourth novel, *Tar Baby*: "That voice of hers is so *sure*. She lures you in, locks the door and encloses you in a special, very particular universe—all in the first three pages."[1] Outrage among black writers was so great after *Beloved* failed to win the National Book Award during the fall of 1987 that forty-eight black writers, among them, June Jordon, Toni Cade Bambara, Amiri Aaraka, Maya Angelou, Paule Marshall, John Wideman and Alice Walker signed an open letter in January, published in the *New York Times Book Review*, protesting that Morrison had never won that award or the Pulitzer.[2]

Walter Goodman saw this letter as lobbying: "Literary lobbying goes on all the time: the form it takes, perhaps just a friendly telephone call or some cocktail party chitchat, is generally more discreet than a salvo in the *Times Book Review*, but the intent is the same."[3] Others, such as one of its signers, novelist John Wideman, whose "Sent for You Yesterday" won a PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction, explained that the purpose of the letter was "not to mount a public relations campaign for Toni Morrison, but merely to point out that sometimes the pie doesn't get shared equally."[4] The letter, penned by June Jordan, whatever else it was, was also a letter of respect and admiration acknowledging the power of Morrison's writings:

> Your gifts to us have changed and made more gentle our time together. And so we write, here, hoping not to delay, not to arrive, in any way, late with this, our simple tribute to the seismic

> character and beauty of your writing. And furthermore, in grateful wonder at the advent of *Beloved* your most recent gift to our community, our country, our conscience, our courage flourishing as it grows, we here record our pride, our respect and our appreciation for the treasury of your findings and invention.[5]

Toni Morrison did win the Pulitzer for *Beloved* in March of 1988.[6] Although this was a very important literary honor, it was not her first: her third novel, *Song of Solomon,* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977; her second novel, *Sula,* is excerpted in a major American literary anthology, Random House's *The American Tradition in Literature;* and her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* is excerpted in *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women.* She is a writer of international status: although there was no winner in 1988, she was one of three contenders for the Ritz Hemingway prize in Paris.

To review Morrison for an important publication is to take risks, the risk that you will be read by people who know her work, that you will be publicly perceived as wrong—wrong because your view is clearly political, or wrong because it is not; wrong because the importance of her issues make artistic assessment difficult, or wrong because her artistic brilliance may make her ideas, her psychological insights, seem more original, more true, than they are. One is afraid of being seduced by rhythmic prose, provocative images, and easy, warm, answers. And yet all types of reviewers take the plunge and respond to a work like *Beloved.*

In the *London Review of Books,* Mary-Kay Wilmers wrote, and correctly so, ". . . while there have been many great books, there are few great book reviews."[8] One can learn much from them, however, because they are important reflectors of politics and culture and, like books themselves, they help shape the ideas and art of a particular culture's values.

I collected approximately twenty reviews of *Beloved,* all published before the results of the Pulitzer Prize were announced in March of 1988. Winning such an important award under any conditions does not make the book reviewer's job any easier. There is even more pressure than before to see the novel as Morrison's best. But even before the Pulitzer committee honored the book, assessment was complicated by the novel's subject—the horror of slavery and its fallout—reminding both reviewer



and reader not only of the existence of past atrocities, but that these atrocities can never be totally annihilated. Between Morrison's prestige, her race and her subject, *Beloved* was difficult to evaluate with even a semblance of objectivity.

Some reviewers, such as Charles Larson, writing for the *Tribune,* and Helen Dudar for the *Wall Street Journal,* seemed to have no difficulty declaring that *Beloved* was Morrison's masterpiece. Larson found the work as original as anything that had appeared in our literature in the last twenty years and an understandable culmination for Morrison: "*Beloved* is the context out of which all of Morrison's earlier novels were written. In her darkest and most probing novel, Toni Morrison has demonstrated once again the stunning powers that place her in the first ranks of our living novelists."[11]

But the judgments of reviewers are certainly not written in stone. In an introduction to her own book review on *Tar Baby,* Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* discusses the nature of book reviews, particularly about books written by black authors:

> Book reviews are an immediate, succinct response to a writer's work, quite different, it seems to me, from essays in which one has the time and space to analyze their craft and ideas. They are necessary to the creating of a wider, more knowledgable audience for the writer's work—an important responsibility of the critic. Often, however, book reviews of works by Afro-Americans are written as if the reviewer is not aware that an Afro-American intellectual tradition exists, that certain ideas may, at the time, be under critical discussion, or as if the writers had not written anything else.[12]

This was not usually a problem in the reviews of *Beloved.*[13] Morrison is too famous a novelist for that to occur. The majority of reviews responded to it in context to her previous work and to an Afro-American intellectual tradition. And they assumed that their job was not to convince others to read her. Rosellen Brown when reviewing *Beloved* for *The Nation* begins her essay making some assumptions in exact opposition to Christian's concerns: "Can we not assume that most people interested in new fiction will want to read Toni Morrison's latest book, drawn to it not by rave reviews but by an understanding that she is a gifted novelist who always has something to say?"[14] Most reviewers did seem to

begin with this assumption and to focus their attention not so much on whether the novel deserved to be read, but how it fits into the world of modern American literature, how it connects the past with the future and whether or not it was one of Morrison's best novels.[15] Many reviews were actually review essays, trying to analyze as well as describe the nature of Morrison's writing and ideas.[16] Most would agree with Thomas R. Edward who wrote in the *New York Review of Books*, "A novel like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* makes the reviewer's usual stereotypes of praise and grumbling seem shallow."[17]

In reviewing *Beloved*, a few critics noted that in this book Morrison is turning the tradition of autobiographies and slave narratives into a complex piece of work which is both historical and mythic.[18] Morrison attempted in this novel to recreate the era of Reconstruction, using the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave who actually killed her child in order to prevent the child's capture, but who unlike Sethe, was herself returned to slavery. Unlike nineteenth century slave narratives which avoided horrifying details so as not to discourage middle class abolitionists by overwhelming them, Morrison mentions terrifying events in all their disgusting cruelty and horror. As a writer who understands the power of myth, Morrison skillfully created a novel in which archetypal quests and archetypal errors are presented. Without apology, Morrison weaves her characters' stories from both this world and one inhabited by the dead. Realistic and mythic techniques are intertwined and Morrison does not explain or apologize: the eponymous Beloved, the child slaughtered by her mother with a handsaw, is a restless ghost, self-reflective enough to tell part of her own story. Believing in that ghost, accepting a black folk-world where ghosts exist, is as necessary in *Beloved* as accepting human flight was in *Song of Solomon*, and believing in the plague of robins was in *Sula*.

Reviewers far from agree about Morrison's use of the supernatural in *Beloved*. Paul Gray, writing for *Time*, found it problematic both in conception and language:

> The flesh-and-blood presence of Beloved roils the novel's intense, realistic surface. This young woman may not actually be Sethe's reincarnated daughter, but no other explanation of her identity is provided. Her symbolic significance is confusing; she seems to represent both Sethe's guilt and redemption. And Morrison's attempt to make the strange figure come to life strains unsuccessfully toward the rhapsodic.[19]



Rosellen Brown of *The Nation*, however, found Morrison's methods, her unwillingness to explain the walking dead, a successful ploy allowing an intimacy with her reader that explanations would shatter: "Haints and spirits routinely walk the roads of the black South; to explain would be to acknowledge that outsiders were listening."[20] Anita Snitow of *The Village Voice* also found the character of Beloved a "drag"[21] on the narrative, and Carol Rumens of *Times Literary Supplement* found the ghost a failure: "The travails of a ghost cannot be made to resonate in quite the same way as those of a living woman or child."[22] But Margaret Atwood, in her *New York Times* book review, found the magical world of *Beloved* successful. Atwood had no problem with the ghost: "In this book, the other world exists, and magic works, and the prose is up to it. If you can believe page one—and Ms. Morrison's verbal authority compels belief—you're hooked on the rest of the book."[23]

The reviewers also disagreed about the quality of Morrison's realism. While some found her style perfect, others found it cloying.[24] As Rosellen Brown of *The Nation* noted, Morrison rarely mentioned anything once. But for Brown, this repetition across an "increasingly familiar psychological field" ends in the coherence of the whole deadly scene. For her, the novel is a successful opera: "*Beloved* brings us into the mind of the haunt as well as the haunted. That is an invitation no other American writer has offered, let alone fulfilled with such bravery and grace."[25]

Stanley Crouch of *The New Republic* refused to be moved by the novel. He found it nothing more than another "blessed are the victims" novel, a tradition in Afro-American literature begun, he asserts, by James Baldwin, but one that is shabby, unrealistic and which should not be emulated. He found her folk material "poorly digested," her feminism "rhetoric," and her use of magic realism "labored." While he acknowledged that she has "real talent," "an ability to organize her novel in a musical structure, deftly using images as motifs," he found that she "perpetually interrupts her narrative with maudlin ideological commercials." He felt distant from the horrors of slavery as presented in the

novel: "In *Beloved* Morrison only asks that her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do." In summary, Crouch found her work "melodramatic," containing too many attempts at "biblical grandeur," showing no courage to face the ambiguities of the human soul, a sentimental text. He found Morrison "American" in a cheap sense, "as American as P. T. Barnum."[26]

Crouch's review was angry and, it seemed to me, self-protective. While other reviewers found flaws, none found the ideas and sentiments as cheap as he did. Most found the book extremely valuable. Hope Hale Davis of *The New Leader* found the drama ringing inescapably true[27] and Judith Thurman of *The New Yorker* found the novel not only realistic, but originally so in its depiction of the differences between male and female hardship, how women's pride is damaged by the world on an even more intimate level than men's. Thurman found the risks taken by the characters to honor their own autonomy realistic and impressive and the choice they made between the claims of past grief and potential happiness, universal. In essence, Thurman focused on what she learned from the text: that the illusion of autonomy may be more debilitating in the long run and more cruel than a full consciousness of servility. For her *Beloved* is psychologically realistic. She is hooked: "But if you read *Beloved* with a vigilant eye, you should also listen to it with a vigilant ear. There's something great in it: a play of human voices, consciously exalted, perversely stressed, yet holding true. It gets you."[28]

*Beloved* also "gets" Marcia Ann Gillespie, former editor of *Essence*, and reviewer for *Ms*. Gillespie noted that Morrison succeeded in this novel to give voice to pain by exploring the parameters of maternal love and human understanding. For Gillespie, the characters of this novel "soar off the page into our blood." Gillespie believes Morrison is asking important questions concerning power, love, the cost of living, control, compromise, self-acceptance, individual and cultural progress. And she, like the majority of reviewers, found Morrison an impressive explorer of the psyche and spirit of a people."[29]

Charles Johnson, director of creative writing at the University of Washington, believes that this is her best book despite its flaws: "In novelistic terms, there isn't much of a plot, and Toni



has a real problem with dramatic scenes . . . [also] the characters are not given the full, three dimensional development that we might see in other writing." He adds, however: "Nevertheless *Beloved* is the book that every black cultural nationalist writer has been trying to write for the last 20 years."[30]

Why such contradictory responses? Why does Thomas R. Edwards of the *New York Review of Books* find "wisdom"[31] and D. Keith Mano of the *National Review* find that Morrison successfully avoids melodrama by being mistress of what he calls the "theatrical retard"[32] while Stanley Crouch thinks the novel is nothing more than New York glitz and cheap thrills Afro-American style? Perhaps the contradictions reflect the novel's emotional atmosphere—perhaps *Beloved* simply makes some reviewers extremely uncomfortable, forcing confrontations not usually required by literature. These critics do not want to reflect upon these particular human issues and they are unable to see how exploring these new details from new perspectives permanently expands the tradition of American literature,[33] and allows valuable characters into the world, ones they can see no value in examining. Not every reviewer wants his or her consciousness transformed by these particular insights, and Morrison's prose in this novel is pushy: for me, as for Marsha Jean Darling of *Women's Review of Books, Beloved* seeks to transform the consciousness of the reader through the telling of the tale. Morrison, in an interview with Darling, puts the responsibility back on the reader, an uncomfortable position for some:

> They always say that my writing is rich. It's not—what's rich, if there is any richness, is what the reader gets and brings him or herself. That's part of the way in which the tale is told. The folktales are told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It's not over just because it stops. It lingers and it's passed on. It's passed on and somebody else can even alter it later. You can even end it if you want. It has a moment beyond which it doesn't go, but the end is never like in a Western folktale where they all drop dead or live happily ever after.[34]

Perhaps the fact that the novel did not stop for me is what initiated this study. I wanted to, but could not, go further into what Morrison set up as a possible, positive life for Sethe with Paul D. and Denver. For the novel to have integrity, I needed to

believe in Sethe's ability to begin a new life and get past her relationship to Beloved and Sweet Home, something it seemed Morrison wanted me to be able to accomplish. At first, because I could not believe in the novel's positive continuation, potentially positive ending, I looked for reasons to defend my disbelief. I was a milder version of Stanley Crouch: the scene in which Sethe was suckled by the nephews annoyed and offended me because the characters were destroyed by it, and at first I preferred to think inappropriately destroyed. Why couldn't Halle or Sethe get over it? Why was this, after so many humiliations, so pivotal? I argued with myself, then a nursing mother, that the nephews couldn't even get the milk—that a nursing woman's body would shut down, but came to realize that this was Morrison's point and that shutting down itself was a privilege, one that Sethe's body was unable to provide because she was too vulnerable. Overwhelming personal humiliation was the point, being treated like a cow and having no alternative but to accept one's treatment was the point, a point I was as unwilling to face because it deeply frightened me, as Crouch was somehow unwilling to face that the holocaust is more than a sentimental symbol of hell, that being a victim is not always a choice.

A fan of Toni Morrison ever since my first reading of *Song of Solomon*—I read *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* shortly after—my anger, my inability to suspend my disbelief, to be stuck on such a detail, surprised me. I had not felt so personally, so intimately, threatened reading her other four novels.

I had found *The Bluest Eye* elegantly symbolic, extraordinarily beautiful, unusually musical, the characters very human and the ending appropriate for the novel: while *The Bluest Eye* ended with sorrow—the marigolds would not grow, Pecola Breedlove was mad, and Cholly was dead, I trusted that Claudia would survive because she was the subject, the actor, the lover, the judge, and even while she narrated that it was "much too late" on the edge of town for anything to grow, one never sensed that this included her. Reading *The Bluest Eye*, I never questioned the details, or the depth of my response. Where the narrator and characters led, I was able to follow.

*Sula* also ended with partial destruction, but with enough insight so that I trusted a certain community healing. Nel was the center of this healing because she realized that Sula, the destructive and brilliant artist without the proper art object, was part of her, immortal, and that their bond was indestructable, and beyond measurable value. Nel's final cry of intimacy was a fine cry—loud and long—without top or bottom—a connecting cry from which one could continue. *Sula* saddened but satisfied me. I believed in Sula, and in the town, and in the robins, and in the art of the novel and the world, and in the future.



*Song of Solomon* also worked for me. Even when I disliked the characters, I believed in their existence. I had no problems with the magic realism and none with the characters' veritability. The novel, examining magic, history, community and responsibility, may have ended with the possible death of Milkman and Guitar as well as Pilate, but I felt, as the narrator seemed to want me to feel, mostly the resurrection, the possibility of a more whole, spiritual, and worthy future.

Morrison's fourth and most controversial novel, *Tar Baby*, her tropical novel, too plush, too slick, too mechanical for some, also worked for me, probably because the characters as types have a vitality which separated them from the usual flat characters, much the way Charles Dickens' characters function. When Jadine broke free from Son, I felt relief, because Son belonged to the past and I wanted Jadine, as she herself wanted, to have the future. However flawed civilization was, Jadine needed the physical earth more than myth, and at this point of her life, if one believed the details of the plot, and I did, she really could not have both Son and reality. I was glad when Son joined the horseman, partially to have him safely out of Jadine's way, partially because he was finding his way home, fulfilling what seemed like the only destiny which was his to follow, making peace with his mythical, cultural depth. I was not sure how far Jadine would get in her Parisian world, but I was not without hope. Morrison had not created her as much of a compromiser, but then she also had not forced me to accept that Jadine necessarily would do fine, just that she had been successful in the past and had learned something about herself in her encounter with Son. I trusted Jadine to pull her own weight, more than I trusted the brutalized Sethe to get out of bed and find the energy to create from her experiences a healthy family and a viable future.

My ambivalence toward *Beloved*, my anger and confusion, surprised me, so I turned to the reviewers. Of course, I knew I would have to return to the text, but I was taking an emotional break. I was comforted when Ann Snitow preferred *Sula*, but oddly, not satisfied. The reviewers could not and did not solve my problems with *Beloved*: when others found the ending problematic, it was not for the same reason that I found it so. Perhaps Stanley Crouch, ironically, turned me around. After reading him, I felt compelled to defend *Beloved*. This novel was not cheap. Morrison, I came to realize, was simply touching new vulnerabilities with a precision so poignant that I was unable to come to terms with its profound impact on me.

As Judith Thurman notes, in *Beloved* Morrison is exploring the difference between male and female hardship. A woman's pride can be damaged even more than a man's because a woman can be humiliated as a mother: a woman while able to give birth is not necessarily able to see her child through to safety, to spiritual as well as physical viability. Few, not even the generally sensitive Paul D., could comprehend the depth of this damage and the permission it gave Sethe to do outrageous, seemingly inhuman, things such as taking a handsaw to her child to keep it from knowing such humiliation. What I needed to do was acknowledge this vulnerability because I could not imagine surviving it. The ending of *Beloved* was a beginning, a second chance, named, but not dramatically portrayed, handed to the reader to create, if he or she was able.

Accepting the vulnerability, I was able to accept the possibility of a positive future for Sethe, even for a happy enough family life. After all, Sethe's surviving daughter, Denver, was working, part of the community, independent enough to continue maturing, and Paul D. wanted a life with Sethe and Denver. Although imperfect, he could make the world weep, and open the first steps toward healing. The fact that he used the traditional male excuse for sleeping with Beloved—"I couldn't help it"—did not make him much worse than the average man and his excuse was certainly more impressive. Sethe was weakened, but not alone, and if nurtured might heal, might heal herself, and her support staff, Denver, Paul D. and the remainder of the community, if imperfect, clearly was in place.



As another gesture toward peacemaking with Sethe, I looked her name up in the *New English Dictionary.* The eighteenth century Indian meaning of Seth is a "leading Hindoo merchant or banker" and its fourteenth century Scottish meaning is "atonement." And of course, Seth is the name of Adam's and Eve's son, the ancester of Noah and hence of the existing human race: without his survival there is no human history according to the Book of Genesis. A number of Gnostic sects of the second century, according to this same source, held Seth in great veneration, believing that Christ was Seth reborn.

I had at my disposal, after this encounter with the dictionary, some new reasons why it was difficult, but linguistically essential, for me to accept Sethe's future: Sethe is the banker, the subject, the owner, like Claudia, the namer and therefore cannot die if the world is to continue; and she is atonement, the mending and fixing which also accounts for her survival, her second chance; and she is the essential parent whose legacy is the human race itself; and she is Christ, crucified but resurrected. Sethe, Morrison implies, may continue journeying and in choosing her name Morrison shows us that she must. So I, after a good deal of squirming, after studying the reviewers and their complicated responses, made a certain peace with this Pulitzer prize winning novel. My recommendation as a reviewer, as a critic, as a fan of Morrison: read it and grow.

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NOTES

1. Jeane Strouse, "Toni Morrison's Black Magic," *Newsweek* 30 March 1981: 52.
2. Robert Allen, Maya Angelou. Houston A. Baker, Jr., et al., Letter, "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison," *New York Times Book Review*, 24 Jan. 1988.
3. Walter Goodman, "The Lobbying for Literary Prizes," *The New York Times*, 28 Jan. 1988: C26.
4. Kathy Hogan Trocheck, "Black Writers Protest Lack of Recognition for Morrison," (Atlanta, Georgia) *Journal*, January 20, 1988 (Located in Newsbank [Microform]. Literature, 1988, 20: F14, fiche).
5. Letter, *New York Times Book Review*.
6. Dennis Hevesi, "Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved* Wins the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction," *The New York Times*, 1 April 1988: 13, 1.
7. Herbert Mitgang, "*Beloved* Wins Pulitzer," *The New York Times*, 1 April 1988:10-A.
8. Mary-Kay Wilmers, "Diary," *London Review of Books*, 15 September 1988: 21.
9. Charles Larson, "Our Heart of Darkness," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *Chicago Tribune*, 30 Aug. 1987: Volume 14, 1.

10. Helen Dudar, "Toni Morrison: Finally Just a Writer," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 Sept. 1987: 34.
11. Charles Larson, Volume 14, 1.
12. Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985) 65.
13. The problems I found were extremely minor. *Kirkus Review* printed that Denver was ten, the anonymous reviewer of *Book Review Digest* said it belongs in most libraries, an implication which confused me, and Carol Rumens in *Times Literary Supplement* said the novel took place in the 1880s rather than the 1870s. Morrison's earlier work was acknowledged by all the reviewers I read.
14. Rosellen Brown, "The Pleasure of Enchantment" rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *The Nation*, 17 Oct. 1987: 418.
15. I particularly enjoyed the reviews of Anne Snitow in the *Village Voice Literary Supplement*, Margaret Atwood in *The New York Times* and Judith Thurman in the *New Yorker*.
16. Aside from the reviews mentioned in note 15, I found Rosellen Brown's review in the *Nation*, Paul Gray's comments in *Time* and Marcia Ann Gillespie's observations in *Ms* particularly perceptive.
17. Thomas R. Edwards, "Ghost Story," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *New York Review of Books*, 5 November 1987: Volume 34, 18.
18. The reviews which were most concerned with placing Toni Morrison in a literary tradition were written by John Leonard in the *Los Ageles Times*, Marsha Jean Darling in the *Women's Review of Books*, Thomas R. Edwards in *The New York Review of Books*, Walter Clemons of *Newsweek*, and Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times*.
19. Paul Gray, "Something Terrible Happened," rev. of *Beloved*,by Toni Morrison, *Time*, 21 Sept. 1987: Volume 130, 75.
20. Rosellen Brown, 418.
21. Ann Snitow, "Death Duties," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *The Village Voice Literary Supplement*, September 1987: 25.
22. Carol Rumens, "Shades of the Prison-House," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *Times Literary Supplement*, 22 October 1987: 1135.
23. Margaret Atwood, "Haunted by Their Nightmares," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *New York Times Book Review*, 17 Sept. 1987: 50.
24. Rosellen Brown, Stanley Crouch, Judith Thurman, and Marcia Ann Gillespie were the reviewers most interested in this topic.
25. Rosellen Brown, 419, 421.
26. Stanley Crouch, "Aunt Medea," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *The New Republic*. 19 Oct. 1987: Volume 197, 38-43.
27. Hope Hale Davis. "Casting a Strong Spell," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *The New Leader*. 2 Nov. 1987: Volume 70, 21.
28. Judith Thurman, "A House Divided," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *The New Yorker*, 2 November 1987: Volume 63, 175-80.
29. Marcia Ann Gillespie, "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Out of Slavery's Inferno," *Ms*, November 1988: 68; and "Toni Morrison," *Ms*, Jan. 1988: 60-1.
30. Donn Fry, "A Protest in Praise of Toni Morrison," *Seattle* (Washington) *Times*, January 22, 1988 (Located in Newsbank [Microform], Literature, 1988, 20: G1-2, fiche).
31. Thomas R. Edwards, 19.
32. D. Keith Mano, "Poignant Instant, Stubborn Evil," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *National Review*, 4 December 1987: Volume 39, 55.



33. Almost all the reviewers thought Morrison, with this novel as well as with earlier novels, had earned a place among the best American novelists. Among those who verbalized this most strongly and effectively were Margaret Atwood, Thomas R. Edwards, John Leonard, Charles Larson, Michiko Kakutani, Walter Clemens and Rosellen Brown. Nellie McCay has recently edited a collection of essays on Toni Morrison published by G. K. Hall and reviewed favorably by Marilyn E. Mobley in the *Women's Review of Books*, December 1988.
34. Marsha Jean Darling, "Ties That Bind," rev. of *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison, *Women's Review of Books*, March 1988: Volume 5, number 6, 4-5; "In the Realm of Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," 6.