

MHDAon

“A Slow Walk of Trees” by Toni Morrison

In Toni Morrison’s article, “A Slow Walk of Trees” written in 1976 on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the United States, she mentions events in her family’s history and the history of the country which are incorporated into her novel, *Song of Solomon*.

List at least seven events in this article which are mentioned in the novel and tell where they are mentioned (Chapters and page numbers) and analyze their significance to a chosen theme.

my boss's approval to develop a system for organizing excess stock in the storeroom. I shelved items in roughly the same order as they were displayed in the store. The system was helpful to all the salespeople, not just to me, since everyone was stymied by the boss's helter-skelter system. What he did was store overstocked items according to each wholesaler, even though most of us weren't there long enough to know which items came from which wholesaler. His supposed system created chaos. When he saw what I had done, he was furious and insisted that we continue to follow the old slap-dash system. I had assumed he would welcome my ideas the way my manager did last summer when I worked in a drugstore. But he didn't and I had to scrap my work and go back to his eccentric system. He certainly could learn something about employee relations from the drugstore manager.

PROFESSIONAL
SELECTIONS:
COMPARISON-
CONTRAST



TONI MORRISON

One of the most honored contemporary American writers, Nobel Prize-winner Toni Morrison (1931—) also received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) and the Pulitzer Prize for her novels *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1986). Her other books include *Dancing Mind* (1967) and *Paradise* (1997). In her capacity as an editor for Random House, she worked on autobiographies of boxer Muhammad Ali and civil rights activist Angela Davis, as well as on *To Die for the People* (1995), an account of the Black Panther Party. The essay reprinted here first appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* on July 4, 1976, the date of the American bicentennial.

Pre-Reading Journal Entry

Though the members of a family often share some specific values and beliefs, they are just as likely to differ in their opinions on other subjects. In your journal,

list the topics about which you and relatives of an older generation—your parents' or grandparents', for example—hold different, possibly opposite views. Then, for each topic on your list, go back and jot down what these differing beliefs are.

A SLOW WALK OF TREES

His name was John Solomon Willis, and when at age 5 he heard from the old folks that "the Emancipation Proclamation was coming," he crawled under the bed. It was his earliest recollection of what was to be his habitual response to the promise of white people: horror and an instinctive yearning for safety. He was my grandfather, a musician who managed to hold on to his violin but not his land. He lost all 88 acres of his Indian mother's inheritance to legal predators who built their fortunes on the likes of him. He was an unreconstructed black pessimist who, in spite of or because of emancipation, was convinced for 85 years that there was no hope whatever for black people in this country. His rancor was legitimate, for he, John Solomon, was not only an artist but a first-rate carpenter and farmer, reduced to sending home to his family money he had made playing the violin because he was not able to find work. And this during the years when almost half the black male population were skilled craftsmen who lost their jobs to white ex-convicts and immigrant farmers.

His wife, however, was of a quite different frame of mind and believed that all things could be improved by faith in Jesus and an effort of the will. So it was she, Ardelia Willis, who sneaked her seven children out of the back window into the darkness, rather than permit the patron of their sharecropper's existence to become their executioner as well, and headed north in 1912, when 99.2 percent of all black people in the U.S. were native-born and only 60 percent of white Americans were. And it was Ardelia who told her husband that they could not stay in the Kentucky town they ended up in because the teacher didn't know long division.

They have been dead now for 30 years and more and I still don't know which of them came closer to the truth about the possibilities of life for black people in this country. One of their grandchildren is a tenured professor at Princeton. Another, who suffered from what the Peruvian poet called "anger that breaks a man into children," was picked up just as he entered his teens and emotionally lobotomized by the reformatories and mental institutions specifically designed to serve him. Neither John Solomon nor Ardelia lived long enough to despair over one or swell with pride over the other. But if they were alive today each would have selected and collected enough evidence to support the accuracy of the other's original point of view. And it would be difficult to convince either one that the other was right.

Some of the monstrous events that took place in John Solomon's America have been duplicated in alarming detail in my own America. There was the public murder of a President in a theater in 1865 and the public murder of another President on television in 1963. The Civil War of 1861 had its encore as the civil-rights movement of 1960. The torture and mutilation of a black West Point Cadet (Cadet Johnson Whittaker) in 1880 had its rerun with the 1970's murders of students at Jackson State College, Texas Southern and Southern University in Baton Rouge. And in 1976 we watch for what must be the thousandth time a pitched battle between the children of slaves and the children of immigrants—only this time, it is not the New York draft riots of 1863, but the busing turmoil in Paul Revere's home town, Boston.

5 Hopeless, he'd said. Hopeless. For he was certain that white people of every political, religious, geographical and economic background would band together against black people everywhere when they felt the threat of our progress. And a hundred years after he sought safety from the white man's "promise," somebody put a bullet in Martin Luther King's brain. And not long before that some excellent samples of the master race demonstrated their courage and virility by dynamiting some little black girls to death. If he were here now, my grandfather, he would shake his head, close his eyes and pull out his violin—too polite to say, "I told you so." And his wife would pay attention to the music but not to the sadness in her husband's eyes, for she would see what she expected to see—not the occasional historical repetition, but, *like the slow walk of certain species of trees from the flatlands up into the mountains*, she would see the signs of irrevocable and permanent change. She, who pulled her girls out of an inadequate school in the Cumberland Mountains, knew all along that the gentlemen from Alabama who had killed the little girls would be rounded up. And it wouldn't surprise her in the least to know that the number of black college graduates jumped 12 percent in the last three years: 47 percent in 20 years. That there are 140 black mayors in this country; 14 black judges in the District Circuit, 4 in the Courts of Appeals and one on the Supreme Court. That there are 17 blacks in Congress, one in the Senate; 276 in state legislatures—223 in state houses, 53 in state senates. That there are 112 elected black police chiefs and sheriffs, 1 Pulitzer Prize winner; 1 winner of the Prix de Rome; a dozen or so winners of the Guggenheim; 4 deans of predominantly white colleges. . . . Oh, her list would go on and on. But so would John Solomon's sweet sad music.

6 While my grandparents held opposite views on whether the fortunes of black people were improving, my own parents struck similarly opposed postures, but from another slant. They differed about whether the moral fiber of white people would ever improve. Quite a different argument. The old folks argued about how and if black people could improve themselves, who could be counted on to help us, who would hinder us and so on. My parents took issue over the question of whether it was possible for white people to improve. They assumed that black people were the humans of the globe, but had serious doubts about the quality and existence of white humanity. Thus my father, distrusting every word and every gesture of every white man on earth, assumed that the white man who crept up the stairs one afternoon had come to molest his daughters and threw him down the stairs and then our tricycle after him. (I think my father was wrong, but considering what I have seen since, it may have been very healthy for me to have witnessed that as my first black-white encounter.) My mother, however, *believed* in them—their possibilities. So when the meal we got on relief was bug-ridden, she wrote a long letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt. And when white bill collectors came to our door, it was she who received them civilly and explained in a sweet voice that we were people of honor and that the debt would be taken care of. Her message to Roosevelt got through—our meal improved. Her message to the bill collectors did not always get through and there was occasional violence when my father (self-exiled to the bedroom for fear he could not hold his temper) would hear that her reasonableness had failed. My mother was always wounded by these scenes, for she thought the bill collector knew that she loved good credit more than life and that being in arrears on a payment horrified her probably more than it did him. So she thought he was rude because he was white. For years she walked to utility companies and department stores to pay bills in person and even now she does not seem convinced that checks are legal tender. My father loved

excellence, worked hard (he held three jobs at once for 17 years) and was so outraged by the suggestion of personal slackness that he could explain it to himself only in terms of racism. He was a fastidious worker who was frightened of one thing: unemployment. I can remember now the doomsday-cum-graveyard sound of "laid off" and how the minute school was out he asked us, "Where you workin'?" Both my parents believed that all succor and aid came from themselves and their neighborhood, since "they"—white people in charge and those not in charge but in obstructionist positions—were in some way fundamentally, genetically corrupt.

So I grew up in a basically racist household with more than a child's share of contempt for white people. And for each white friend I acquired who made a small crack in that contempt, there was another who repaired it. For each one who related to me as a person, there was one who in my presence at least, became actively "white." And like most black people of my generation, I suffer from racial vertigo that can be cured only by taking what one needs from one's ancestors. John Solomon's cynicism and his deployment of his art as both weapon and solace, Ardelia's faith in the magic that can be wrought by sheer effort of the will; my mother's open-mindedness in each new encounter and her habit of trying reasonableness first; my father's temper, his impatience and his efforts to keep "them" (throw them) out of his life. And it is out of these learned and selected attitudes that I look at the quality of life for my people in this country now. These widely disparate and sometimes conflicting views, I suspect, were held not only by me, but by most black people. Some I know are clearer in their positions, have not sullied their anger with optimism or dirtied their hope with despair. But most of us are plagued by a sense of being worn shell-thin by constant repression and hostility as well as the impression of being buoyed by visible testimony of tremendous strides. There is repetition of the grotesque in our history. And there is the miraculous walk of trees. The question is whether our walk is progress or merely movement. O.J. Simpson leaning on a Hertz car¹ is better than the Gold Dust Twins on the back of a soap box. But is *Good Times*² better than Stepin Fetchit? Has the first order of business been taken care of? Does the law of the land work for us?

¹Prior to his arrest and trial for the murder of his ex-wife, O. J. Simpson, a former football superstar, was the spokesperson for Hertz Rent-a-Car (editors' note).

²A popular 1970s television show featuring an African American family. Many critics felt that the show perpetuated harmful stereotypes (editors' note).

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Morrison states her main idea. If she doesn't state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.
2. How did Morrison's grandfather and grandmother feel about opportunities for blacks? Why did they disagree?
3. Why does Morrison say she grew up in a "racist household"? To what extent does Morrison consider herself a racist?

4. What evidence is there, according to Morrison, that life for blacks in the United States has improved? What evidence does she cite to the contrary?
5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: *unreconstructed* (paragraph 1), *rancor* (1), *sharecropper* (2), *lobotomized* (3), *virility* (5), *irrevocable* (5), *hinder* (6), *arrears* (6), *fastidious* (6), *succor* (6), *vertigo* (7), and *deployment* (7).

Questions About the Writer's Craft

1. **The pattern.** Morrison builds her essay around the comparison-contrast between first, her grandparents, and then her parents. However, numerous other comparisons and contrasts appear in the essay. Identify some of these and explain how Morrison uses them to reinforce her thesis.
2. Look closely at paragraph 5. How does Morrison's sentence structure there underscore her central point?
3. Examine the lengthy analysis of the differences between Morrison's parents (paragraph 6). How does Morrison shift the focus from her grandparents to her parents, then from one parent to the other?
4. Reread the final seven sentences in paragraph 7, starting with "There *is* repetition...." Why do you suppose Morrison italicized the word *is* in the first, second, and fourth sentences, but not in the third?

Writing Assignments Using Comparison-Contrast as a Pattern of Development

1. Morrison writes that when she was a child, occasionally "a white friend . . . made a small crack" in her distrust of whites. Who in your life has "made a crack" in your generalizations about an issue, about people, or about yourself? Perhaps an aging but energetic relative changed your opinion that the elderly are to be pitied, or a friend's passion for Bach and Chopin challenged your belief that those who like classical music are boringly highbrow, or a neighbor showed you that you had real athletic potential. Write an essay contrasting your "before" and "after" beliefs, remembering to provide vivid details to bring the contrast to life. You may want to read Maya Angelou's "Sister Flowers" (page 178) to gain insight into the way one person can alter another individual's entrenched views.

2. Write an essay contrasting the belief systems of two individuals whose views affected the way you think about a particular aspect of life—for example, academic success, tolerance for others, financial well-being. Like Morrison, begin by describing the differences in the individuals' beliefs.