Before You Read

Cinderella’s Stepsisters

Meet Toni Morrison
(born 1931)

In 1993 Toni Morrison became the first African American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. This prestigious prize, given to one outstanding writer every year, recognizes a variety of literature and authors. This recognition of Morrison solidified her standing as an internationally renowned and respected author.

“At some point in life the world’s beauty becomes enough.”
—Toni Morrison

Beginnings Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. She later changed her first name to “Toni” because she grew tired of people mispronouncing “Chloe.” As a child, Morrison read constantly. She also enjoyed listening to her community’s folktales, which her father related to her. She began her studies at Howard University, where she received a bachelor’s degree in English. She went on to earn a master’s degree from Cornell University. After graduating, she taught English at Texas Southern University and Howard University. She became a textbook editor and later a senior editor at a major publishing house in New York City.

Morrison published her first novel, The Bluest Eye, in 1970. The Bluest Eye is set in 1941 in Ohio and tells the story of a young African American girl who is consumed with wanting to achieve a white ideal of beauty: blonde hair and blue eyes.

Style Morrison’s work is praised for its examination of the experience of being an African American woman in the United States at various historical times. Morrison does not necessarily use straightforward narrative to tell her stories and sometimes abruptly changes scenes or point of view. Morrison also incorporates elements such as myth and superstition.


Morrison writes to communicate the female African American experience. She claims that one of her goals in writing is to encourage other African American women to “repossess, re-name [and] re-own.” Yet ultimately her books are popular with a wide variety of readers and, as a result, Morrison has been called one of the best American writers of her time.

Author Search For more about Toni Morrison, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL9794U2.
Connect to the Speech
When were you responsible for others? Freewrite for a few minutes about such a time and explain how you remained concerned about and compassionate towards others.

Build Background
Toni Morrison was asked to speak at graduation at Barnard College, a women's college affiliated with Columbia University in New York City. In her speech, Morrison uses the fairy tale of Cinderella to make the point that women in positions of power should still look out for their fellow females.

Set Purposes for Reading

**Big Idea** Keeping Freedom Alive
As you read Morrison's speech, ask yourself, How does she take a stand against selfish behavior and for freedom for women?

**Literary Element** Author's Purpose
An author's purpose is his or her intent in writing a literary work. An author's purpose depends in part on the audience. For example, the author may intend to inform, persuade, entertain, tell a story, or express an opinion. As you read, ask yourself, What particular characteristics of Morrison's audience may have influenced her purpose in the speech?

**Reading Strategy** Identify Problem and Solution
Persuasive essays and speeches are often built on a problem-solution pattern. The author tries to convince the reader that an undesirable belief, situation, or practice needs to be changed in a certain way. As you read this speech, ask yourself, What problem does Morrison call to the reader's attention, and what solution does she suggest?

**Tip:** Chart the Problem and Solution Create a two-column chart similar to the one below. In the left column, list aspects of the problem. In the right column, list aspects of the solution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Solution</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women stop the promotion of other women's careers.</td>
<td>Women must come to the aid of the victims.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Vocabulary**

- **fetish** (fet'ish) n. abnormally obsessive preoccupation or attachment; a fixation; p. 444
  She has a fetish for books; she buys them constantly.

- **dominion** (da min'yan) n. control or the exercise of control; p. 444
  The king's dominion spans the entire country.

- **deflect** (di flekt') v. to cause to turn aside; to bend or deviate; p. 445
  The wind deflected the ball from its straight path.

- **emanate** (em'a nat') v. to come or set forth, as from a source; p. 445
  The campfire emanated heat throughout the night.

- **abstraction** (ab strak'shan) n. theoretical concept isolated from real application; p. 445
  An idea is an abstraction, while an action is not.

**Tip:** Context Clues Remember that some context clues restate while others provide synonyms, antonyms, or examples.
Let me begin by taking you back a little. Back before the days at college. To nursery school, probably, to a once-upon-a-time time when you first heard, or read, or, I suspect, even saw "Cinderella." Because it is Cinderella that I want to talk about; because it is Cinderella who causes me a feeling of urgency. What is unsettling about that fairy tale is that it is essentially the story of household—a world, if you please—of women gathered together and held together in order to abuse another woman. There is, of course, a rather vague absent father and a nick-of-time prince with a foot fetish. But neither has much personality. And there are the surrogate "mothers," of course (god- and step-), who contribute both to Cinderella's grief and to her release and happiness. But it is her stepsisters who interest me. How crippling it must have been for those young girls to grow up with a mother, to watch and imitate that mother, enslaving another girl.

I am curious about their fortunes after the story ends. For contrary to recent adaptations, the stepsisters were not ugly, clumsy, stupid girls with outsize feet. The Grimm collection describes them as "beautiful and fair in appearance." When we are introduced to them they are beautiful, elegant, women of status, and clearly women of power. Having watched and participated in the violent dominion of another woman, will they be any less cruel when it comes their turn to enslave other children, or even when they are required to take care of their own mother?

It is not a wholly medieval problem. It is quite a contemporary one: feminine power when directed at other women has histori-

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1. Adaptations are compositions that are written in a new form.
2. Contemporary means "current" or "modern."

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**Vocabulary**

- **fetish** (fet′ish) n. abnormally obsessive preoccupation or attachment; a fixation
- **dominion** (da min′yan) n. control or the exercise of control
cally been wielded in what has been described as a "masculine" manner. Soon you will be in a position to do the very same thing. Whatever your background—rich or poor—whatever the history of education in your family—five generations or one—you have taken advantage of what has been available to you at Barnard and you will therefore have both the economic and social status of the stepsisters and you will have their power.

I want not to ask you but to tell you not to participate in the oppression of your sisters... Women who stop the promotion of other women in careers are women, and another woman must come to the victim's aid. Social and welfare workers who humiliate their clients may be women, and other women colleagues have to deflect their anger.

I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. I am alarmed by a growing absence of decency on the killing floor of professional women's worlds. You are the women who will take your place in the world where you can decide who shall flourish and who shall wither; you will make distinctions between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor; where you can yourself determine which life is expendable and which is indispensable. Since you will have the power to do it, you may also be persuaded that you have the right to do it. As educated women the distinction between the two is first-order business.

I am suggesting that we pay as much attention to our nurturing sensibilities as to our ambition. You are moving in the direction of freedom and the function of freedom is to free somebody else. You are moving toward self-fulfillment, and the consequences of that fulfillment should be to discover that there is something just as important as you are and that just-as-important thing may be Cinderella—or your stepsiseter.

In your rainbow journey toward the realization of personal goals, don't make choices based only on your security and your safety. Nothing is safe. That is not to say that anything ever was, or that anything worth achieving ever should be. Things of value seldom are. It is not safe to have a child. It is not safe to challenge the status quo. It is not safe to choose work that has not been done before. Or to do old work in a new way. There will always be someone there to stop you. But in pursuing your highest ambitions, don't let your personal safety diminish the safety of your stepsister. In wielding the power that is deservedly yours, don't permit it to enslave your stepsisters. Let your might and your power emanate from that place in you that is nurturing and caring.

Women's rights is not only an abstraction, a cause; it is also a personal affair. It is not only about "us"; it is also about me and you. Just the two of us.

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3. Expendable means "easily replaced."

Author's Purpose How does Morrison make this plea to her audience effective?

Identify Problem and Solution What aspect of the problem does Morrison identify in this paragraph?

Vocabulary

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After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. (a) What are the main points Morrison made in her speech? (b) If you were a Barnard graduate, what comments might you have offered in response to her speech?

2. (a) According to Morrison, how do women in power often treat one another? (b) How might this affect the graduates to whom she is speaking?

3. (a) From Morrison’s view, how should those in power treat one another? (b) How should the students’ education distinguish them from others in power?

Analyze and Evaluate

4. (a) How does Morrison persuade her listeners to take action? (b) How does Morrison’s alignment with Cinderella’s stepsisters strengthen or weaken her argument?

5. Is this speech appropriate for men as well as women? Explain your position.

6. Morrison claims that women often oppress other women. What evidence does she use to support this statement?

Connect

7. **Big Idea** Keeping Freedom Alive Morrison takes a stand against women oppressing women in this speech. In what ways do you find her argument to be valid?

8. **Connect to Today** Think of women who are in positions of power in the world today. In your opinion, do those women try to help other women, or do they “participate in the oppression of [their] sisters”? Give reasons to support your belief.

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**Literary Element | Author’s Purpose**

**SAT Skills Practice**

1. Morrison’s purpose in making this speech was to

(A) explain that women can be as competitive and cutthroat as men

(B) persuade her listeners to be encouraging and nurturing to other women

(C) point out that fairy tales do not always teach sound lessons for life

(D) demonstrate how to be successful without being cruel

(E) provide examples of how women have participated in their own oppression

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**Partner Activity** With a classmate, discuss how Morrison uses the familiar Cinderella story to make a point. Make a web like the one below to organize your thoughts about the analogy. Then, evaluate whether you think that this analogy is successful and why.

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**Review: Analogy**

An analogy is a comparison that shows the relationship between two things that are otherwise dissimilar. Writers often use an analogy to explain something unfamiliar by comparing it to a familiar concept.
Reading Strategy: Identify Problem and Solution

Some persuasive essays or speeches present multiple problems and solutions. In her brief commencement address, Morrison chooses to focus on one significant problem and solution. Refer to the chart you made as you read the selection to help you answer the following questions.

1. In your own words, state the problem that Morrison poses in her speech.
2. What solution does Morrison propose to remedy the problem? Do you think this solution is adequate? Explain.

Vocabulary Practice

Practice with Context Clues Identify the context clues in the following sentences that help you determine the meaning of each boldfaced vocabulary word.

1. Because Kara did not want to answer the questions, she tried to deflect them.
2. The powerful speaker held dominion over the mesmerized audience.
3. A stench emanates from the garbage cans and rises into the apartment building.
4. Mr. Chang had a fetish for model airplanes, which filled every shelf in his house.
5. Although world peace seems like an abstraction, there are concrete ways to make it a reality.

Write with Style

Apply Repetition

Assignment Write a letter to the editor that uses repetition or other rhetorical devices to help persuade the reader.

Get Ideas As part of her personal style, Morrison uses repetition to make appeals and lend rhetorical force to her writing. Review Morrison’s use of repetition. Then find an editorial with which you strongly agree or disagree. List two or three points you can make to support or rebut the argument presented in the editorial.

Give It Structure Make an outline like the one below that states your thesis and orders your points from most important to least important or vice versa. For each point, list rhetorical devices, such as repetition, analogies, or anecdotes, that you can weave in as you support your points. Begin your letter with a thesis statement that refers to the editorial.

I. Thesis Statement
   A. Most Important Point
      1. Rhetorical Device
      2. Rhetorical Device
   B. Another Important Point
      1. 
      2.

Look at Language Make sure you make strong points; then give them rhetorical force by means of repetition or another device.

Point Example: A dog park is a necessity in a city with 2,348 licensed dogs.

Repetition conveys and emphasizes point Example: The dogs aren’t going away. The dog owners aren’t going away. The need for open space for exercise isn’t going away, either.

Edit and Proofread Proofread your letter, correcting any errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

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Selection Resources For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GL59794u2.

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