

## From Context to Text and Back Again: Teaching Toni Morrison Overseas

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**Abstract :** Introducing Toni Morrison's fiction to a classroom overseas entails a significant pedagogical investment, from monitoring students' uncertain journey through Morrison's shifty semantics to filling in the gaps of cultural knowledge and understanding for the students to be able to relate text to context. A rewarding process, as Morrison's works present a tremendous opportunity for transnational dialogue, an opportunity that hinges upon Toni Morrison's bringing to the fore the untold and unspeakable lives of racial 'Others', but also, crucially, upon her broader critique of Western ideological hegemony. This critique is a fundamental aspect of Toni Morrison's politics and one that appeals to young readers of Toni Morrison in Greece at a time when the questioning of institutions and ideological traditions is precipitated by regional and global change. It is more or less self-evident that to help a class of international students get aboard a Morrison novel, an instructor should begin by providing them with cultural context. These days, students' exposure to Hollywood representations of the African American past and present, as well as the use of documentaries, photography, music videos, etc., as supplementary class material, provide a starting point, a workable historical and cultural framework for textual comprehension. The true challenge, however, lies ahead: it is one thing for students to intellectually grasp the historical hardships and traumas of Morrison's characters and to even engage in aesthetic appreciation of Morrison's writing; quite another to relate to her works as articulations of experiences akin to their own. The great challenge, then, is in facilitating students' discovery of the universal Morrison, the author who speaks across cultures while voicing the untold tales of her own people; this process of discovery entails, on a pedagogical level, that students be guided through the works' historical context, to plunge into the intricacies of Morrison's discourse, itself an elaborate linguistic booby trap, so as to be finally brought to reconsider their own historical experiences using the lens of Morrison's fiction. The paper will be based on experience of teaching a Toni Morrison seminar to a class of Greek students at the American College of Greece and will draw from students' exposure and responses to Toni Morrison's "Nobel Prize Lecture," as well as her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Home*.

**Keywords :** toni morrison, international classroom, pedagogy, African American literature

**Conference Title :** ICALC 2023 : International Conference on American Literature and Culture

**Conference Location :** Singapore, Singapore

**Conference Dates :** July 03-04, 2023