



Playing in the Dark

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Flanking Toni Morrison's new novel, *JAZZ*, on the best-seller list is her exercise in literary criticism, *PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION*. When was the last time a writer had simultaneous hardcover best-sellers in both fiction and nonfiction?

Remove the name "Toni Morrison," however, and *PLAYING IN THE DARK* would be an unlikely best-seller indeed. For some time now, literary critics have assiduously been exploring the impact of what Morrison terms the "Africanist presence" on the American literary imagination. In fact, this has been one of the most fashionable lines of inquiry in contemporary criticism. Astonishingly, Morrison for the most part assumes the role of a pioneer, writing as if this enormous body of scholarship didn't exist.

Like many contemporary academics, Morrison does not merely assert the importance of the "Africanist presence," slighted by earlier generations of scholars; she goes to the opposite extreme, claiming that "the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population"—that is, the black population of the United States. And like many academics, Morrison-the-critic frequently expresses herself in leaden, jargon-laden prose: "Living in a racially articulated and predicated world, I could not be alone in reacting to this aspect of the American cultural and historical condition." In her preface, she refers to the "wholly racialized society that is the United States," a characterization repeated in the text, yet nowhere does she explain the meaning of this suitably portentous indictment. What constitutes a "wholly racialized society"? Do those words have any meaning? In *PLAYING IN THE DARK*, Morrison has betrayed the writer's fundamental responsibility to use language with precision.

Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
<http://www.enotes.com/playing-dark-salem>