

The Reader As Artist

By Toni Morrison

Oprah.com | From the July 2006 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*

The words on the page are only half the story, says Toni Morrison. The rest is what you bring to the party.

Mr. Head awakened to discover that the room was full of moonlight. He sat up and stared at the floor boards—the color of silver—and then at the ticking on his pillow, which might have been brocade, and after a second, he saw half of the moon five feet away in his shaving mirror, paused as if it were waiting for his permission to enter. It rolled forward and cast a dignifying light on everything. The straight chair against the wall looked stiff and attentive as if it were awaiting an order and Mr. Head's trousers, hanging to the back of it, had an almost noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant....

The above opening to a short story by Flannery O'Connor is, to readers content with grasping information, straightforward enough. It introduces a character, Mr. Head, waking up at night and noticing moonlight. To readers who enjoy the practice of reading, the opening is much, much more.

Two approaches seem to me the difference between reading as a skill and reading as an art. The first is quite enough. From knowing what STOP means through understanding a scholarly essay or a legal brief, the necessary skill varies greatly, can always be refined, and lets us negotiate life with some measure of control. Reading as art, not Art (once, depressingly called "critical" reading) is another matter. Like the avid devotion to other arts, it develops over time in any number of ways, takes all sorts of routes, and has many origins.

My own reading skills were enhanced in schools, but my pleasure in, my passion for the art of reading came long before. It came in childhood and it began with listening. Not only was I a radio child who grew up in the decades when radio was paramount, when being mesmerized by the dramas and reenactments from a speaker box was commonplace, I was also surrounded by adults who told stories, reshaped and solicited them from each other as well as their children. The result was a heavy reliance on my own imagination to provide detail; the specific color of things, the feel of the weather, the space characters occupied, their physical features, their motives, why they behaved as they did, and especially the sound of their speech, where so much meaning lay. Listening required me to surrender to the narrator's world while remaining alert inside it. That Alice-in-Wonderland combination of willing acceptance coupled with intense inquiry is still the way I read literature: slowly, digging for the hidden, questioning or relishing the choices the author made, eager to envision what is there, noticing what is not. In listening and in reading, it is when I surrender to the language, enter it, that I see clearly. Yet only if I remain attentive to its choices can I understand deeply. Sometimes the experience is profound, harrowing, beautiful; other times engaging, contemptible, unrewarding. Whatever the consequence, the practice itself is riveting. I don't need to "like" the work; I want instead to "think" it.

In the opening sentences of Flannery O'Connor's story, she chose to direct her readers to Mr. Head's fantasy, his hopes. Lowly pillow ticking is like brocade, rich, elaborate. Moonlight turns a wooden floor to silver and "cast[s] a dignifying light" everywhere. His chair, "stiff and attentive," seems to await an order from him. Even his trousers hanging on its back had "a noble air, like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant." So. Mr. Head has strong, perhaps unmanageable, dreams of majesty, of controlling servants to do his bidding, of rightful authority. Even the moon in his shaving mirror pauses "as if it were waiting for his permission to enter." We don't really have to wait (a few sentences on) to see his alarm clock sitting on an "overturned bucket," or to wonder why his shaving mirror is five feet away from his bed, to know a great deal about him—his pretension, his insecurity, his pathetic yearnings—and anticipate his behavior as the story unfolds. In the accuracy of the 'ear' of the story, its shape, its supple economy and sheer knowingness, it seems to me virtually flawless and deliciously demanding. Which is

to say, I can read it again and again, step into its world confident that my attentiveness will always yield wonder.

You're on the porch with the broom sweeping the same spot, getting the same sound—dry straw against dry leaf caught in the loose-dirt crevice of the cement tiles. No phone, no footfalls, no welcome variation.

In the prologue to Toni Cade Bambara's novel *Those Bones Are Not My Child*, a routine, even humble chore signals alarm, which continues to build. The narrator, distracted, sweeps the same spot, helplessly, unable to free dead leaf and straw from cement. She writes "you" but we know she means "I" and we know she means any mother, any parent, anyone. There is no sound, except the sound of the broom. The quiet is eerie.

Your ears strain, stretching down the block, searching through schoolchild chatter for that one voice that will give you ease. Your eyes sting with the effort to see over bushes, look through buildings, cut through everything that separates you from your child's starting point—the junior high school.

I see the woman—no, I invent her: from fingers clenched on a broomstick to the sandals I'm sure she is wearing. Flip-flops, maybe. She wears a skirt—not jeans. The porch is old cement with crevices and cracks where soil gathers and the fall wind is always blowing leaves...she can't get them out; they're stuck, like she is. The street is tree lined, houses hedged, brick ones, pale clapboard with wide yards. A hose is curled on yellowing grass. A pair of skates that should have been put away? Or a bicycle? The silence is not total—there is traffic beyond, birds—but it is nevertheless disturbing because the single voice needed to calm me is not there. I know that fear. Even when I'm told there is no reason for it. Especially then.

The terror is over, the authorities say. The horror is past, they repeat every day.... You want to believe. It's 3:23 on your Mother's Day watch. And your child is nowhere in sight.

I can do this again: read it and be there once more, anytime I like. Sifting, adding, recapturing. Making the work work while it makes me do the same. Just like leaning into the radio; or sitting cross-legged at the feet of grandparents.

Skill is enough, but I prefer the art.