

1997

Moore, Opal

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Recommended Citation

Dance, Daryl Cumber. "Moore, Opal." In *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, edited by William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, 507-08. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

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about the craft of writing. Long after she left Marshall's workshops, the novelist continued to critique Moore's drafts for her, persistently encouraging her to refine her sense of style and structure and to give thorough and legitimate handling to her male characters. Moore asserts that her first idol was Gwendolyn *Brooks. After reading Brooks and being captivated by her language, she concluded that the only *real* writing had to be poetic. Moore was also profoundly affected by her reading of Toni *Morrison's *Sula*, with its protagonist's rebellion against communal values and generally accepted assumptions.

In her 1989 short fiction, "A Happy Story" (published in *Callaloo*), Moore portrays a somewhat cynical female writer wrestling with questions such as, "How do we achieve happiness? How do we define it?" Presenting her story through sometimes humorous debates with her more optimistic husband, the narrator tries and rejects many different story lines, but from beginning to end, there remains the same germ of a plan for her story: "It's about a woman, . . . Intelligent. Attractive. Educated." This story reflects some of Moore's major concerns in her poetry and short stories, which frequently focus on a black female child or adult who is unable to find happiness in a world with so many restrictions based on *religion, *race, and *gender. In this problematic world there is little happiness (the character in "A Happy Story" doesn't believe there is such a thing as a happy story and can't recall a truly happy moment in her life), little *humor, little *freedom, little real love, little true communication.

Communication (or the lack thereof) is a frequent concern in Moore's work. Often, she insists that silence is an effective, potentially revolutionary form of communication. This revolution through silence, through the unspoken word, is something that the author early learned: Ordered to sit at the Sunday dinner table until she asked to be excused, the six-year-old Opal silently faced her mother for hours, refusing to utter the phrase, "Excuse me"; she had, after all, done nothing to require her to ask to be excused. Similarly, her characters are constantly refusing in subtle and varying ways to comply with rules that do not make sense to them. And Moore, as a writer, is constantly wrestling with the possibility of writing honest stories that obviously go against the grains of someone's taboos.

Moore's work is very intense and often painful. There is little relief in the occasional humor, which tends to be caustic and sardonic, as in "Freeing Ourselves of History: The Slave Closet" (*Obsidian II*, 1988), in which a modern assimilationist, proud of his "freedom," is confronted by a slave. Satirical treatment of this individual who never reaches self-realization ends with him wondering what use a dead slave is to "a modern free man."

Though Moore claims to have given up poetry for short fiction, the poet is evident in everything she writes. Words on a page magically evoking felt life is the essence of her best work. Marked by a mesmerizing, rhythmic beauty, her work paints poetic word pictures (Moore is also an artist) in unexpected but tantalizing images and metaphors. A master stylist,

MOORE, OPAL (b. 1953), poet, short story writer, essayist, educator, and critic of children's literature. Born and raised in Chicago, Illinois, Opal Moore was influenced from childhood by the particular dynamics of the Pentecostal *church; echoes of that institution reverberate in her plots, themes, characters, tone, and language. When Moore entered Illinois Wesleyan University's School of Art in 1970, she was so shocked by her first real encounter with racism and her sense of powerlessness in the face of it that she sought some control over what was happening to her by writing, thus initiating her first journals. She also turned to writing *poetry. After receiving a BFA from Wesleyan in 1974, she enrolled in the graduate program at the University of Iowa, where she began writing fiction. She earned an MA from the University of Iowa's School of Art in 1981, and an MFA from the University of Iowa's Iowa Writers' Workshop in 1982. She has taught creative writing and African American literature at Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia State University, Hollins College, Kassel University (Germany), Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz (Germany), and Radford University.

Moore studied with Paule *Marshall and James Alan *McPherson, both of whom taught her much

Moore, like Toni Morrison, grabs us with the opening phrase and has us pausing frequently to reflect, to relish some particularly apt description, some poignant picture, some surprising turn of phrase, some amazing use of language, some unusually melodic line.

Moore, whose fiction and poetry have appeared in a variety of journals and collections, is preparing a volume of short stories for publication. She has also published a number of critical and pedagogical *essays, in which she frequently focuses on literature for children.

- "Picture Books about Blacks: An Interview with Opal Moore," interview by Donnarae MacCann and Olga Richard, *Wilson Library Bulletin* 65 (June 1991): 24-28.

—Daryl Cumber Dance