

THE TONI MORRISON SOCIETY ANNUAL LECTURE

Tessa Roynon, University of Oxford



## "Voyaging to New Worlds: Toni Morrison's Classicism"

Wednesday, September 21st 2016

7:00 pm, Dye Lecture Hall

Tessa Roynon's lecture will be based on her mono-graph. *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition: Trans-forming America* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

This study explores Toni Morrison's widespread engagement with ancient Greek and Roman tradition. Discussing every novel up to and including *Home* (2012), Roynon examines the ways in which classical myth, literature, history, social practice, and religious ritual make their presence felt in Morrison's writing. Combining original and de-tailed close readings with broader theoretical discussion, she argues that Morrison's classical allusiveness is characterized by a strategic ambivalence.

Adopting a thematic, rather than novel-by-novel approach, Roynon demonstrates that Morrison's classicism is fundamental to the transformative critique of American history and culture that her work effects. Building on recent developments in race theory, transnational studies, and Classical Reception studies, the volume positions Morrison within a genealogy of intellectuals who have challenged the purported conservative nature of Greek and Roman tradition, and who have revealed its construction as a 'white' or pure and purifying force to be a fabrication of the Enlightenment. Exploring the ways in which Morrison's dialogue with Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Virgil, and Ovid relates to her simultaneous dialogue with many other American literary forebears - from Cotton Mather to Willa Cather, or from Pauline Hopkins to F.Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner - Roynon shows that Morrison's classicism enables her to fulfil her own imperative that 'the past has to be revised'.

Tessa Roynon is Teaching and Research Fellow in Literature at the Rothermere American Institute, University of Oxford. She holds a doctorate from the University of Warwick, a Master's from Georgetown University, where she was a Fulbright scholar, and a Bachelor's degree from the University of Cambridge.

In addition to publishing *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition* in 2013, Tessa is the author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Toni Morrison* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and of numerous articles on Morrison which have appeared in *African American Review*, *Journal of American Studies* and elsewhere. She is the co-editor (with Daniel Orrells and Gurminder Bhambra) of *African Athena: New Agendas* (Oxford University Press, 2011). Her current project examines the intellectual formation of Ralph Ellison.

At Oxford, in addition to her teaching and writing projects, Tessa serves on the steering group of the research programme, *Race and Resistance Across Borders in the Long Twentieth Century* ([www.torch.ox.ac.uk/raceresist](http://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/raceresist)), for which she edits the blog, "Voices Across Borders". She is also founding and executive editor of the interdisciplinary book series, *Race and Resistance Across Borders*, at Peter Lang ([www.peterlang.com?rrab](http://www.peterlang.com?rrab)). She recently co-founded and now leads the research network, *Fiction and Human Rights* ([www.torch.ox.ac.uk/fiction-and-human-rights](http://www.torch.ox.ac.uk/fiction-and-human-rights)).

In 2015, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition* was awarded the Toni Morrison Society Prize, for the best single-authored book on Morrison published between 2012 and 2015.