

A New Lens: “Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am” Revitalizes the Life and Language of a Beloved Author

By Grace Burwell

During an otherwise unremarkable day, my 11th-grade peers and I were welcomed to English class by a dark room and bright projector screen. Following our study of Toni Morrison’s “Song of Solomon,” the class watched the documentary “Toni Morrison: The Pieces I Am,” directed by filmmaker Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. “Song of Solomon” was a challenging read, but from the start, I, like many others, fell in love with Morrison’s distinctive and powerful language. Audiences, despite their familiarity with Morrison’s prose, will not only enjoy watching the documentary but will also gain a better understanding of Morrison’s impact on people everywhere.

Greenfield-Sanders had the challenge of representing Morrison’s legacy in a way that both appeals to today’s audiences and remains true to the author’s persona. At first glance, some might expect “The Pieces I Am” to have a monotonous, sugarcoated tone like that of many rudimentary tributes. Instead, the two-hour biopic conveys not only her importance to the world during her lifetime but also why her writing continues to be relevant today.

From the start, the technical elements of the documentary’s opening scene reflect the thought-provoking quality of the film. A pair of hands layers pieces of patterned, colorful paper with fragments of photos of Morrison over the years, literally representing the different pieces of her identity. “She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in all the right order,” Morrison introduces the titular phrase of the documentary, a quote from her novel “Beloved.” Then there’s the music, which starts out slow and hesitant. Tentative strokes of violin fade into a faster, more lively tempo layered with interludes of soulful piano and a rattling, vehement crescendo of excitement. The tone shifts and the harmonies become more lighthearted and playful. Combined with unique visual elements, the music plays an important role in highlighting the passage of time through different stages of Morrison’s life.

Throughout, Greenfield-Sanders weaves interviews with Morrison, her colleagues, friends, and fellow authors together with historical footage to paint a fluid, compelling portrait of her life. From Morrison’s upbringing in a small industrial town in Ohio, to her jobs teaching at universities, to how she became the first African American senior editor at Random House and wrote novels that would eventually win her a Nobel Prize in Literature, Greenfield-Sander’s cinematography truly encapsulates Morrison’s powerful ethos. The documentary points out that one quality of a great writer is the ability to spark human connection, a zeal that Morrison clearly

had in spades. To this end, “The Pieces I Am” does a stellar job solidifying viewers’ appreciation for Morrison’s spirit and keeping her writing alive.