

# CINDERELLA'S STEPSISTERS

by Toni Morrison

## BACKGROUND

Toni Morrison was the first African American to win the Nobel Prize for literature. She grew up during the Great Depression, facing both segregation and racism. This selection is a speech which Morrison delivered at Barnard College's 1979 graduation, during the women's rights movement. Barnard is an all-women's college in New York City.

Let me begin by taking you back a little. Back before the days at college. To nursery school, probably, to a once-upon-a-time when you first heard, or read, or, I suspect, even saw “Cinderella.” Because it is Cinderella that I want to talk to you about; because it is Cinderella who causes me a feeling of urgency. What is unsettling about that fairy tale is that it is essentially the story of a household—a world, if you please—of women gathered together and held together in order to abuse another woman. There is, of course, a rather vague absent father and a nick-of-time prince with a foot fetish.<sup>1</sup> But neither has much personality. And there are the surrogate “mothers” of course (god- and step-) who contribute both to Cinderella’s grief and to her release and happiness. But it is her stepsisters who interest me. How crippling it must have been for those young girls to grow up with a mother, to watch and imitate that mother, enslaving another girl. **A B**

I am curious about their fortunes after the story ends. For contrary to recent adaptations, the stepsisters were not ugly, clumsy, stupid girls with outsize feet. The Grimm collection<sup>2</sup>

1. **fetish** (FEHT IHSH): irrational devotion.
2. **Grimm Collection**: reference to the famous collection of fairy tales compiled by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in the early nineteenth century.

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## **A** READING FOCUS

What **analogy** do you think Morrison might make with the Cinderella story?

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## **B** READING FOCUS

Based on what you have read so far, what do you think the **tone** of this speech will be?

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**A VOCABULARY**

**Academic Vocabulary**

How is Morrison trying to *influence*, or affect, your opinion of the Cinderella story?

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**B QUICK CHECK**

Why does Morrison think that the story of Cinderella’s stepsisters is important to the Barnard graduates?

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**C READING FOCUS**

Underline the **loaded words** in this paragraph. What effect do their **connotations** have on the speech?

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20 describes them as “beautiful and fair in appearance.” When we are introduced to them they are beautiful, elegant, women of status, and clearly women of power. Having watched and participated in the violent dominion<sup>3</sup> of another woman, will they be any less cruel when it comes their turn to enslave other children, or even when they are required to take care of their own mother? **A**

It is not a wholly medieval<sup>4</sup> problem. It is quite a contemporary one: feminine power when directed at other women has historically been wielded in what has been described as a “masculine” manner. Soon you will be in a position to do the very same thing. Whatever your background—rich or poor—whatever the history of education in your family—five generations or one—you have taken advantage of what has been available to you at Barnard and you will therefore have both the economic and social status of the stepsisters *and* you will have their power. **B**

I want not to *ask* you but to *tell* you not to participate in the oppression of your sisters. Mothers who abuse their children are women, and another woman, not an agency, has to be willing to stay their hands. Mothers who set fire to school buses are women, and another woman, not an agency, has to tell them to stay their hands. Women who stop the promotion of other women in careers are women, and another woman must come to the victim’s aid. Social and welfare workers who humiliate their clients may be women, and other women colleagues have to deflect their anger. **C**

I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. I am alarmed by a growing absence of decency on the killing floor of professional women’s worlds. You are the women who will take your place in the world where *you* can decide who

3. **dominion** (DUH MIHN YUHN): rule; control.  
4. **medieval** (MEHD EE VUHL): relating to the Middle Ages, a period in Western European history from the fifth through the fifteenth centuries.

shall flourish and who shall wither; you will make distinctions between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor; where you can yourself determine which life is expendable and which is indispensable. **D** Since you will have the power to do it, you may also be persuaded that you have the right to do it. As educated women the distinction between the two is first-order business.



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I am suggesting that we pay as much attention to our  
60 nurturing<sup>5</sup> sensibilities as to our ambition. **E** You are moving  
in the direction of freedom and the function of freedom is to  
free somebody else. You are moving toward self-fulfillment, and  
the consequences of that fulfillment should be to discover that  
there is something just as important as you are and that just-as-  
important thing may be Cinderella—or your stepsister. **F**

In your rainbow journey toward the realization of personal  
goals don't make choices based only on your security and your  
safety. Nothing is safe. That is not to say that anything ever was,  
or that anything worth achieving ever should be. Things of value  
70 seldom are. It is not safe to have a child. It is not safe to challenge

5. **nurturing** (NUR CHUHR IHNG): promoting growth or development.

**D LANGUAGE COACH**

The words *deserving* and *undeserving* are **antonyms**, or words with opposite meanings. Underline two other words in this sentence that are antonyms.

**E VOCABULARY**

**Word Study**

*Sensibilities* are “sensitive feelings” or the “ability to respond emotionally.” Why does Morrison think that nurturing sensibilities is so important?

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**F READING FOCUS**

Write one **question** you have so far about this speech.

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# Applying Your Skills

## Cinderella's Stepsisters

### VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT

**DIRECTIONS:** Circle the letter of the best synonym (word with a similar meaning) listed for each vocabulary word.

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|------------|------------------|------------------|
| 1. deflect | 2. expendable    | 3. indispensable |
| a. give    | a. indispensable | a. heroic        |
| b. take    | b. unimportant   | b. crucial       |
| c. repel   | c. necessary     | c. expendable    |

### INFORMATIONAL TEXT FOCUS: ARGUMENT: INTENT AND TONE

**DIRECTIONS:** Complete the chart below by describing Morrison's **intent** and **tone** in "Cinderella's Stepsisters" in the boxes on the right.

intent	→	
tone	→	



**Reading Standard 2.8**  
Evaluate the credibility of an author's argument or defense of a claim by critiquing the relationship between generalizations and evidence, the comprehensiveness of evidence, and the way in which the author's intent affects the structure and tone of the text (e.g., in professional journals, editorials, political speeches, primary source material).

### READING SKILLS FOCUS: QUESTIONING THE TEXT

**DIRECTIONS:** Answer the following **questions** about "Cinderella's Stepsisters":

1. What is Morrison's overall argument? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Is the argument persuasive? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_