

The Two Worlds of Nobel-winner Toni Morrison



TONI MORRISON
Committed to racial justice

The legacy of slavery is a key theme in the novels of Toni Morrison, winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature. In her writings, the long and murderous enslavement of blacks reverberates across many generations and comes to define American society in ways that are not often publicly acknowledged. Gemini News Service profiles the first black woman to win the world's highest literary honour.

Kevin J. Kelley writes from Washington

None of her novels, 1993 Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison tells the tale of a beautiful black woman torn between the glittering elegance of Paris and the more earthy allure of her African-American lover.

Morrison herself has straddled these two worlds throughout her literary career. Striking a balance between her race-conscious anger and the polite collegiality of the academy will perhaps become even more difficult following receipt of the \$825,000 Nobel award and the international recognition that accompanies it.

The first black woman to earn this honour is unlikely ever to be so swayed by celebrity's temptations that she tempers her passionate commitments to racial justice.

Chloe Anthony Wofford (Morrison's original name) was born 62 years ago in Lorain, Ohio, a Midwestern steel town. Her parents were southern farmers who had joined the mass black migration northward in the early decades of the 20th Century.

In addition to learning hard lessons about economic survival and racial oppression, Morrison was immersed by her family in the rich oral tradition of African-American culture. Ghost stories in particular, the author has recalled, were among her earliest and strongest sources of inspiration.

These elements from her past permeate Morrison's fiction. Each of her six novels, beginning in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye*, grapples with the theme of bigotry, both historical and im-

mediate, and its effects on individual lives. The stories are told in lyrical, lilting language and are replete with phantasmagoric imagery that has occasionally evoked comparisons with the style of Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Her intellectual gifts and personal determination enabled Morrison to transcend her initially unpromising circumstances. She earned a degree in English literature in 1955 from the prestigious Cornell University, writing her thesis on the subject of suicide in the novels of Englishwoman Virginia Woolf and white American novelist William Faulkner.

Morrison then became a professor, teaching literature in Texas and at Howard University in Washington, the best known of the country's historically black colleges. During the time at Howard, the nascent novelist married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. They were divorced in 1964. Now a single mother of two young children, Morrison took a job the following year in New York as an editor at Random House, a major US publisher.

Even as she labored to improve the work of other writers, Morrison was quietly polishing her own craft. At a time when few African-American women writers had achieved critical recognition, she emerged as something of a pioneer with publication of *The Bluest Eye*, a story about a black girl who yearns to emulate the attributes of white female beauty.

That work was followed in 1977 by the much-acclaimed *Song of Solomon*, Morrison's only novel featuring a male protagonist. Her status as one of the finest writers in the US became firmly established with the publication in 1981 of *Tar Baby* and the 1987 *Beloved*, which is generally considered a contemporary masterpiece.

In *Beloved*, Morrison examines the 300-year history of African-American slavery, centering her harrowing, hunting story of a runaway slave who silts her daughter's throat rather than surrender the girl to a life of bondage. Morrison has explained that she was initially reluctant to write about the slave experience, but eventually decided she had a duty to herself and her readers to relate the realities of a crime that involved some 60 million deaths.

In the novel, as in history, the long and murderous enslavement of a race reverberates across many generations and comes to define US society in ways that are not often publicly acknowledged.

Most recently, Morrison has produced *Jazz*, a tale of love and violence set in the Harlem of the 1920s, as well as a book of criticism entitled, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. She currently teaches creative writing at Princeton University.

In interviews before winning the Nobel Prize, Morrison has made clear that she cannot and will not forgive white America for its treatment of black people. This abiding rage had led her, at times, to take some highly controversial positions. Morrison has, for example, defended the high rate of black teenage pregnancy, arguing that

nature intends adolescent girls to have babies and that it is society, not these young mothers and fathers, that bears primary responsibility for the problems that often ensue.

The author has been noticeably reluctant to echo the views of some other prominent African-Americans, such as Jesse Jackson, who contend that irresponsible and self-destructive behaviour within the black community is a key cause of black suffering in today's US.

Describing Morrison's achievement, many commentators have maintained that the Nobel laureate's novels manage to transcend the boundaries of race. While Morrison does indeed speak to universal humanity, this interpretation of her work is mainly wishful thinking on the part of cultural arbiters determined to believe that the US has largely over-

come the legacy of racism. Morrison's work argues just the opposite.

She does hold out hope for redemption, as suggested by her often-quoted observation: "What is curious to me is that bestial treatment of human beings never produces a race of beasts."

A more telling expression of her philosophy may have been contained in a speech she delivered in 1986 before an international literary congress meeting in New York. "Had I lived the life the state had planned for me from the beginning," Morrison declared, "I would have lived and died in someone else's kitchen, on somebody else's land, and never written a word. That knowledge is bone-deep, and informs everything I do."

KEVIN J KELLEY is Editor of *Toward Freedom*.

ISLAM AND THE WEST

Making a Close Understanding even Closer

Rupert Butler, LPS special correspondent writes from London

POPULAR interest in Islamic culture in Britain is growing fast. The Prince of Wales has proclaimed. In a speech made in Oxford the Prince gave a picture of a country grown multi-racial and multicultural — a trend reinforced by a flourishing Islamic community.

The Prince was speaking to mark his visit to the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies of which he is to be vice-patron and on the eve (from 7 November) of his visit to Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait.

He singled out the valuable contribution such communities made to the economic and cultural richness of the country. But he went on to make it clear that tolerance and the ability of differing cultures to live together, as instanced in Britain, by no means told the whole story of relations between Islamic and western worlds.

While believing wholeheartedly that the links between these two worlds matter more today ever before, he stated that the degree of misunderstanding remained 'dangerously high'.

After enumerating the common monotheistic vision shared by Islam and Christianity — a belief in one divine God, the transience of earthly life, the

assurance of life to come — the Prince went on to examine what he saw as dividing that vision.

There tended, he believed, to be an emphasis on the extreme and the superficial. There was need to distinguish Islam from the customs of some of the Islamic states.

To many of us in the west, Islam is seen in terms of the tragic civil war in Lebanon, the killings and bombings perpetrated by extreme groups in the Middle East, and by what is commonly referred to as Islamic fundamentalism. The guiding principle and spirit of Islamic law, taken straight from the Qur'an, should be those of equity and compassion. We need to study its actual application before we make judgments.

There was a need to distinguish between systems of justice administered with integrity, and those which had been deformed for political reasons into something no longer Islamic.

However, the Prince made it clear there were considerable dangers within the Middle East itself, singling out 'the unmentionable horrors being perpetrated in southern Iraq'. The unique way of life of the Marsh Arabs, thousands of years old, was being systematically devastated and destroyed.

The Prince went on: 'To me, the supreme and tragic irony of

what has been happening to the Shia population of Iraq — especially in the ancient city and holy shrine of Kerbala — is that after the western allies took immense care to avoid bombing such holy places it was Saddam Hussein himself, and his terrifying regime, which caused the destruction of some of Islam's holiest sites.'

Here was a cause for which, even at the eleventh hour, Islam and the west could join forces for the sake of common humanity.

Returning to the theme of mutual tolerance an understanding between the Islamic world and the west, the Prince issued a warning about failure to comprehend the extent to which many people of Islam genuinely feared western materialism and mass culture. The Prince made reference to a powerful feeling of disenchantment, of the realisation that western technology and material things are insufficient, and that deeper meaning to life lies elsewhere in the essence of Islamic belief.

To him, the extent to which Islam and been a part of Europe for so long had come as a revelation. It has helped to create modern Europe. It is part of our own inheritance, not a thing apart.

China

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Beijing are overweight, the paper said, citing figures from the Municipal Committee on Problems of Ageing.

Weight problems are believed to be one reason why so many old Chinese exercise. Another is to remain mentally agile.

One of the most popular exercises is qigong, a combination of meditation and gentle physical movement. China's senior leader Deng Xiaoping, who is in his 80's, has reportedly stayed mentally alert through qigong.

Not all the denizens of the dawn go for exercises, though. Some, like retired education official Yao Yuzhou, prefer to dance, waking up at five every morning to begin the day swaying to music at a Beijing park.

DOWN THE MEMORY LANE

Majid: The Grateful One

LITTLE Majid was the son of a manual labourer Hamid. Hamid was a poor but ever smiling man, besides Majid he had a charming little daughter, Murni. I came across Majid lying unconscious in a bed in my ward. He was admitted late at night for head injury, sustained while he was knocked down by a speeding motor car. He was barely seven or eight years old, his anxious parents were waiting outside to meet me.

The injury sustained by Majid was quite severe, he had a skull fracture and multiple bruises all over his face. After the usual investigations, a blood clot had to be removed from his brain. In spite of the surgical intervention he did not regain consciousness and the right side of his body became paralytic. We waited anxiously for three weeks and gave him symptomatic treatments. After three weeks he started gaining back his consciousness and became fully conscious about a week later, but to our utter bad luck he was speechless. After three months of patient speech training, he started to talk like a little child to the delight of the parents and the doctors. He became normal thereafter.

Whenever he saw me he would call me, "Dada! Salam alekum! ab kaise hai?" I replied, "Pahle batao tum kaise ho?" He used to say "Khuda aur apni to zante hai main kaise hun". Meaning: — "Grandpa please be with you, how are you?" — "Just tell me how are you?" — "God and you both are aware how I am!"

He became a regular visitor to my clinic thereafter on every Friday. He used to bring a red rose bud and placed it on my table. I asked him one day, "Majid, why do you bring me a rose bud every Friday?" he said with a charming smile: "Dadaji! ab to jante honge ek doktor Khuda jaisa Rahman hote hai. Ist liye maine har jumma ko ab ko puja kaffe aata hun. Ab ne mera jan bachaya ab se bara aur kon hai mera?"

Meaning: "Grandpa you must be aware that a doctor is as kind hearted as Khuda the Rahman-ur-Rahim. So on every jumma day I come to worship you with the rose bud. There is nobody in my life who is more venerable than you."

I became very much emotionally upset, tears rolled down my cheeks. Majid became nervous and tried to wipe off the tears with his small hands.

Majid's puja went on for twelve long years, when he grew up to be a healthy young man. Hamid got a job in the Coni Field area of Dhanbad and left Calcutta with his family. In 1978, one evening Hamid, Majid, Murni and a sweet teen-aged bride came to see me. The bride Ayesha Khatun was our Majid's wife! She touched my feet and placed a five rupee bank note at it and said, "Dadaji! meri salam to aur Khuda se ham sab ko liye dua mango".

Meaning: "Grandfather! accept my salutations and always pray to God for bestowing his kindness on us."

Majid must be now a hard working thirtysix years old young man, though I do not hear from him any more, but his thought still moistens my eyes!

The Zeitgeist

by Hubert Francis Sarkar

The zeitgeist is: While you reconcile, end all guiles. As you embrace, just be baptized in some heavenly grace.

Wolves are many. They fleece the lamb and hide behind the fleece of it. Just after they commit the gravest wrong, they just mimic the humblest rabbit.

I have seen some holocausts and my friends, you have some. And you understand which wolves I am talking about. Which wolves exert every clout to shroud the violated Angelina's testimony in doubts.

The zeitgeist is: Sheer machinations are no substitute for a reconciliation. Of course, you must shake hands; but, watch out: the brigand may have forgotten the reprimand.

The British Council Language Matters

The Intro

Today's column has many of our regular features. There is another Writing Pad and Language Lab, and also another Word Processor. In addition there is another vocabulary game of jumbled words and a few teasers.

The Language Lab

In this column we want you to write to us about any little problems that you have with English and we will see if we can 'analyse' them. We will try to give the best answer possible in the space available.

We must start today by thanking those who have been writing in to us. As you are aware we cannot answer all the questions we receive.

Sometimes the issues raised will be answered by other articles that we have already planned. However, some questions are too open to be answered in a short space like this. It is much better to give one particular example that you would like us to discuss.

Today, Md Mahboobur Rahman asks...

I know that 'I would be grateful if you could send me

a letter' is correct. But if I write 'I shall be grateful if you are able to send me a letter', is that also correct?

There are two main issues in the answer to this question.

Firstly, business letter writing can be very 'formulaic'. That means that certain phrases are used in certain situations and alternatives are rare.

Secondly, if we look at the grammar of the two phrases, there is an important difference. The first one is a second conditional - it is about a possible but uncertain future. The second is a first conditional - it refers to a likely event in the future.

If you are writing to someone and asking them to do something for you, it is politer to assume that they might do it but it is not sure. When you use the first conditional you seem to be taking it for granted that it is going to happen.

So, in short, your sentence is not grammatically wrong. But it may not be appropriate in a particular situation.

If you want to write to us with any questions you have, simple or complicated, please write to The Language Lab, c/o The Daily Star.

The Writing Pad

Dear Mr Rahman

I would like to draw to your attention a very special new offer that we are currently making to all our regular customers.

As part of the launch of our new ASKI brand, we are offering you the chance to stock a limited quantity on a sale or return basis.

We believe you will find that this product has tremendous potential and is certain to prove an enormous success. After the trial period we are sure that you will want to add this to your regular order.

Please complete and return the enclosed special order form and we will dispatch your goods within a few days, along with the promotional material.

Yours sincerely

Today we would like to look briefly at some aspects of the layout and punctuation of the sample letter above.

Several people have written to us about whether to indent paragraphs or not. This question also affects the positioning of the final 'Yours sincerely'.

I'm afraid the answer is that there is no magic answer. Personal preference and house style will determine exactly what you do in these areas. Many organisations wish to see paragraphs indented, and the signature centred or right justified. Others prefer to have everything left justified.

It is often thought that the last option (left justification) is simply intended to make a secretary's work quicker - he or she will not have to make the few extra keystrokes necessary to indent. As a result some people think it is a lazy style. However, it is not really important why this style came about. It is now probably the one of the most common ways of laying out a letter.

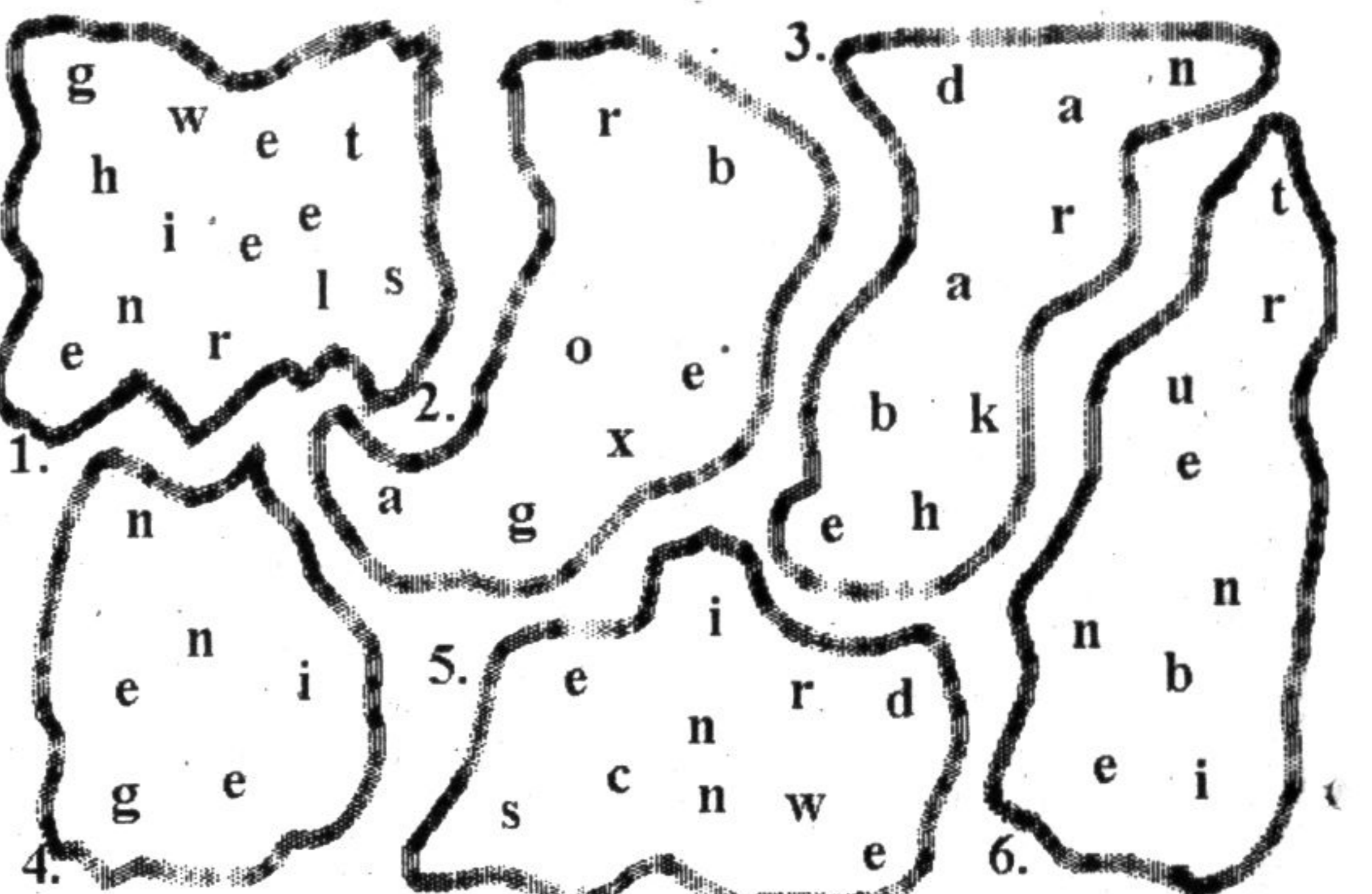
As for punctuation, the example letter above raises two interesting issues: the use/lack of a comma after the opening 'Dear xxxx' and after the final 'Yours sincerely'.

The first is still rather unusual. Most people feel that a comma is necessary after the salutation because that is the way they were taught how to do it (and teachers are never wrong, of course!) On the other hand, commas after 'Yours sincerely' are definitely becoming less frequent.

Things do change - some styles are adopted by a few and then drop out of use again; others gradually become standard. In letter writing as in many other things there are fashions. What is unheard of today may be commonplace tomorrow and dated by next week.

Wobbly Words

Try this word puzzle. In each shape the letters are jumbled up. Put them in the correct order. Be careful. There is more than one word in some of them. What do they all have in common?



1. 2. 3. 4.
5. 6.

The Word Processor



Answers: 1. steering wheel 2. gearbox 3. handbrake 4. engine 5. windscreen 6. mirror/life - They are all parts of a car.

Contributors this week: Marina Burns, Dennis O'Brien, Janet Raynor, Robert Shrubball