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THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S "RECITATIF"

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ABSTRACT

Like all work of Toni Morrison, "Recitatif" also centers on questions of racism, society, and chauvinism. Uncommonly, nevertheless, the racial identities of the three leading characters are intentionally kept inexplicable. The reader notified that one of Twyla and Roberta is black, and the other is white, but it is not clear which belongs to which community. All through the short story, the author provides different hints about the race of leading characters (Twyla and Roberta) that cater the purpose of confusing the reader and, in performing so, enlightening the person's thoughts and beliefs about the racism. The author tries to discover the experiences of these characters of different racial identities; however, she never reflects the race of either one except with a chain of societal codes that underline how racism might conflate with rank, uncertain physical qualities, and societal customs, for instance, eating some food items. Ambiguity is the central theme used in the story to provoke readers to raise the question of racial identities, and support the initiative that it is an apparent trait. The author deliberately does not openly talk about the racial identities of two girls. She just states them in the narrative as 'salt and pepper', and never makes clear whether they are white or black. The central idea of the essay is to give possible answers as to what intent the author follows with her narrative approach and to make readers question their nature and the ambiguous nature of racial discrimination.

Key Words: Racism, Toni Morrison, Racial Identity, ambiguity

Toni Morrison (1931-) is an African-American author who has written many important and challenging narratives of the contemporary era. Her excellent illustrations of African-American experiences and the issues of women, in particular, are studied and debated at high literary levels (Lacy 86). She is recognized as a leading player on the international literary stage because of her exceptional perception on American historical account and her ground-breaking writing tactics. One of the main issues in Toni Morrison's novel is the 'Issue of Race'. This paper deals with the short story 'Recitatif' by Toni Morrison (1983). It demonstrates that 'Recitatif' is an exceptional literary work, as it challenges the reader to try and determine the racial identities of the two main characters, without ever actually revealing them. First, 'Recitatif' is analyzed by pointing out the clues Morrison gives readers on the racial identities of Twyla and Roberta and discuss them and their effect on the reader. It is evident that no explicit statements can be made about their ethnic identities, and that it is all about the stereotypes readers might have (and their imagination). It then

discusses whether this is supposed to direct the reader's attention to Maggie and what her significance is. The conclusion of the essay seeks to give possible answers as to what intention Morrison follows with her narrative strategy, and also make readers question their nature and the ambiguous nature of racial discrimination.

Twyla and Roberta first see each other at an orphanage when they are eight years old. Twyla describes Roberta as 'a youngster from a whole other racial identity'; therefore, one can conclude from the very start that these two girls have two very different ethnic identities (Morrison, 'Recitatif' 2979). Her statement underlines the fact that next to each other they are looking like 'salt and pepper', indicating that one's skin color is white and the other one is black (2079). What does the reader not learn from the narrative is; which one is Twyla and which Roberta? Neither one name nor the other sounds African American nor typically white. If anything, Roberta could almost sound like a Latina name. As young Roberta seems to be less educated than Twyla, 'she could not read at all', one might stereotypically assume that she is an African American of the two (2079). However, it is told that Roberta excelled in playing jacks and one wonders if this is an indicator; if black children usually played jacks or if it were white children. Though, in reality, it was probably a game enjoyed equally by kids of both races. Twyla's mother Mary seems to leave her at the shelter for the purpose of going out, which is indicated by Twyla's innocent description of her mother 'dancing all night' (2078).

One wonders if Mary is not poor at all but only selfish, or if she needs to go out at night to earn money. Possibly even by going so far as prostituting herself, she is after all repeatedly described as a beautiful woman but also as lacking intelligence and as wearing shabby clothes. The shelter employee saying Mary should take Twyla home rather indicates the first option. In contrast to Twyla's mother, Roberta's mother is sick, which might explain why Mary described Roberta to Twyla as smelling funny and never getting her hair washed; her mother must have been her only caretaker, and now that she is sick no one takes care of Roberta's appearance. When the mothers meet one another, Roberta's mom depicted as a very tall woman with an enormous cross in her neck. She refuses to shake hand with Mary, which might be an indicator of either racism or Mary looking like a prostitute. However, both a black and a white woman could refuse to shake the hand of a female of the other race for many racist reasons.

As the story progresses, it is made clear that Roberta's mother never got over her sickness, which means that the 'sickness' is most likely referring to a mental illness or alcoholism. The reader may now question whether a white or a black woman would be more prone to one of these than the other, or would be more likely a Christian, but will surely come to no impressive result. Twyla describes the food at the shelter as being good while she points out that Roberta did not eat a lot of her food. It may be understood as Roberta being picky, an attribute stereotypically allocated to a wealthy person, which one might perceive as being most likely white. Also, it makes the reader wonder whether the descriptions of the food that Roberta did not eat or the food that Twyla recalls being used to give any indication of their racial background. The same goes for the food Roberta's mother brings later, e.g. the chicken.

However, Roberta's mother was sick, and it would not be surprising if that had limited the girl's appetite while Twyla only appreciated the food very much, as Mary never cooked for her. The next time they meet after their parting in the orphanage is as young women at the restaurant where Twyla waits. Roberta dines there with two male friends, who Twyla describes as having heads and faces full of hair. Moreover, she describes Roberta's hair as '*big and wild*' (Morrison, 'Recitatif' 2083). All of this sounds initially probably as if they have 'Afros' to the reader, but one could also imagine them as white and having hippie hair and beards like the late John Lennon had for example (Sollors, "Beyond ethnicity: Consent and descent in American culture" 244). In contrast to that, Twyla later points out that Roberta wears her hair short and sleek when they meet as married women. Moreover, one of Roberta's companions has a meeting with Jimi Hendrix, a modern American rock guitarist and singer at the time. It makes the reader wonder, whether Roberta's partner is black like Hendrix. But then again Hendrix surely also had many non-African-American fans and probably also business partners and friends. The next time they meet, they are both married; Twyla to firefighter James Benson, Roberta to a man named Kenneth Norton, who is in the computer business. The names of the husbands once again give us no clue about race, they sound British if anything.

Due to her marriage, Roberta has become a wealthy woman with four step-children. She is wearing fine clothes, uses a limousine and has two servants. At this point, one might question whether a black woman would have any issues with employing servants and whether this indicates that Roberta is, in fact, white. Twyla only has one son. The number of children they have could once again be used by the reader to try and categorize them into races, but as Roberta has not given birth to any of 'her' children, the 'data' seems void for this kind of analysis. The fifth encounter they have is when they end up protesting on different sides about the desegregation busing. Twyla looks beautiful with her son being bused away, while Roberta protests against her children sent to a different neighborhood. Still one cannot determine which race the women or their children belong to, even less so as one does not know whether any of them is in an interracial marriage, which might be possible as they must have gotten married after Jimi Hendrix death, in the 1970s, after miscegenation laws got abolished.

Furthermore, Twyla makes a comment that sounds potentially racist, '*Who do they think they are? Swarming the place like they have it*' (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2088). The following comment is of similar character as one earlier made by Twyla that particularly catches the eye, '*Everything is easy for them. They think they own the world*' (2088). However, Twyla might refer to white people with this comment just as she might refer to wealthy individuals and the reader is once again left '*in the dark*' (2085). Furthermore, Twyla's protest signs do not make sense without Roberta's.

It is an allegory on how the racial identity of one of them shaped by the existence of the other (Stanley 80). It is as if they need each other to define themselves. For instance, when they look at each other, they look into a mirror that shows them what they are not, which therefore confirms what they are. The existences of the two women correspond just like their protest signs do. And the result to the reader is that they are simply 'different' from one another. According to Werner Sollors in "Beyond ethnicity: Consent and descent in American culture":

Double-consciousness is a word originated by Du Bois to explain the conflict African-Americans experience having an African and an American identity. According to such a term, characters may be attracted to mirrors, bright windows, or smooth surfaced ponds (244).

When Twyla and Roberta get introduced at the orphanage, Roberta looks out of the window, but this seems too little of an indicator to decide that Roberta is black. As the years go by, Twyla and Roberta seem to drift apart, the surprising thing about their relationship is though that they share many things; like their time at the orphanage, negligent mothers, and, finally, their "othernesses". In *The Invention of Ethnicity* Sollors (1991) explains that '*the most interesting thing about our separateness is that, finally, it has the possibility of being shared*' (11). In the end, the reader has to accept that there is no clear indication of who is black and who is white and that this must be the author's intention, even if it possibly leaves the reader frustrated. Morrison in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) said about 'Recitatif', that it was '*experimentation in the deletion of all racial clues from a story about two girls of different races for which racial individuality is crucial*' (xi). It looks like her 'experiment' was successful.

Throughout Twyla's and Roberta's encounters, the reader learns more and more about the kitchen woman of the shelter, Maggie, a disabled woman who was '*mute*' and had '*legs like parentheses*' (Morrison, 'Recitatif' 2080). Twyla recalls how Maggie fell one day and no one helped her; how the older girls laughed at her and Twyla and Roberta were too scared to help her and shortly after that began to bully her too. When Twyla and Roberta meet for the third time, about twenty years after Roberta left the shelter, Roberta says that Maggie did not fall but was assaulted by the older girls. If there is a harassed minority in the focus of this short story, it is embodied not by Twyla or Roberta, but by Maggie.

The girls in the orphanage described as belong to different kinds of races. So it does seem unlikely for the assault to be motivated by her race, but rather by the fact that she was disabled – and an easy target; she was small, old and the children of the orphanage knew about her routine. The next time they meet Roberta states that Maggie was black and claims that they both kicked her. Twyla rejects the idea that she could have kicked the woman and also that she was black. However, later she is not sure about it anymore, '*When I*

thought about it, I couldn't be certain. She wasn't pitch-black, I knew' (2090). Earlier on Maggie's skin color is described as 'sandy', so it seems likely that she at least was not white (2080).

Moreover, Twyla recalls that she did not kick Maggie, but certainly wanted to and revealed that she projects the resentment she feels for her mother on Maggie. And that Maggie being hurt gave her a feeling of re-established justice. The insight that gained into Twyla's emotions about Maggie's assault reminds the reader of how one imagines white people to have acted way before the 1960s when slaves were punished, or after Reconstruction, when innocent black people lynched. Furthermore, Maggie being physically mute and receiving no help reminds us of slaves who had neither voice nor rights. The last time they meet, Roberta confirms that they did not participate in the assault, but that she too would have liked to do so back then. She also states that she is not sure anymore if Maggie was black, '*But now I can't be sure*' (2091).

All along Roberta's memories of the day appear to be more accurate, one can argue about whether this is due to her belonging to the same race as Maggie or the opposite. The end of 'Recitatif' has Roberta crying, she seems terrified, '*Oh shit, and Twyla. Shit, shit, shit.*', and asks, '*What the hell happened to Maggie?*' (2092). It can be interpreted in at least two ways. On the one hand, Roberta might just wonder what happened to her after they left the orphanage. On the other hand, Roberta might not recall at all how the assault on Maggie ended. Possibly it was not an assault after all, but murder. And the loss of memory, the uncertainty both Twyla and Roberta experience when thinking about the event might be an indicator that what they witnessed traumatized them so deeply that their minds blocked the memories. The headmaster of the orphanage being fired shortly after, at least according to Roberta, might be the result of the kitchen woman murdered. Furthermore, the appearance of the place where the crime took place, the orchard, in Twyla's dreams might be a sign of her trauma. The ending of the story is open; it is left to the imagination of the reader what happened to Maggie.

With 'Recitatif', Morrison makes readers realize their stereotypes and re-evaluate them (Williams 102). Moreover, in doing so, she also shows them that even though people seem well acquainted with stereotypes, they cannot determine for sure what races Twyla and Roberta belong to, which emphasizes that stereotypes are just that; stereotypes, they might apply sometimes, but not always. As Morrison once said, '*descriptions belong to the definers, not the defined*' (Morrison, *Beloved* 199). Morrison makes the readers wonder why Maggie and her otherness triggers so much hate and violence in the young girls at the orphanage. Maybe Morrison intends to show us, how easily racism comes to the human mind and how it takes the most innocent victims. According to Morrison it was a very similar question that made her start one of her novels, '*Paradise*', 'How do fierce, revolutionary, moral people lose it and become destructive, static, preformed – exactly what they were running from?' (Williams 101). If people would not behave like this, would not gain a complete satisfaction from this, it is doubtful that things like slavery and genocide would ever have taken place. With the short story 'Recitatif', Toni Morrison does not simply show readers their stereotypical ways of thinking; she raises much more existential and deeper questions about our human nature and the origins of racism (Bennett 211).

It can say that in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" the ambiguous nature of racial discrimination is evidently observed. This ambiguity is presented all through the encounters Roberta and Twyla have over the time--meeting at the dinner, the grocery shop, and much more (Li-Li 814). In fact, the author might be expecting the reader makes an attempt to determine the racial identity of these two girls, as it is immaterial in both the narrative and in regular life. The short story encourages the readers to critically assess the reading procedure by fixing racial individuality about the matter to repair the identity of Maggie. Moreover, it also lets the person who reads to decode the hints in accordance to their habituation and then requires readers to assess them also. The story also invites readers to be active and not inert (Barker 193). With the short story 'Recitatif' Toni Morrison does not simply show us our stereotypical ways of thinking, she raises much more existential and deeper questions about our human nature and the origins of racism. She analyses how much value the humans have given to racism. Through her short piece of art, she conveys one huge question and creates an element of awareness. The Recitatif makes talks of the extent of hatred that can be caused due to the presence of black white problem. This happens because of all religious, cultural, ethnical and racial

differentials. This world is full of discriminatory activities which have led to hatred, violence and war. Ever think of why all these war happens or why all over the globe humans are being killed. The answer lies underneath the tables of racial, religious and cultural differences. The racial differences have bought human beings to the point where they no longer care about even an individual's life while they are thinking of racism. Racism is very uncertain and Morrison has questioned a number of elements through her narrative writing, she has been very open to convey a mind opening view point. This research has opened pathways for future authors, professors and other social activist writers to further write narratives about such topics existing in the society.

To sum up, the story of Toni Morrison is the only published short narrative that seeks to explore the racial identities of its characters through relationships between the characters and their exposure to the outside world around them. The author does not reflect which character belongs to which race. Interpreting the racial individuality of each girl is significant to figure out how every race outlines their position in the community and reflect how the black woman redevelops their individuality with the feminism approach in a white and man-dominated group (Pateman 14). In this paper, the race of the two leading characters of the story (Roberta and Twyla) is discovered by assessing the cultural values, political, and financial hints concealed in the narrative.

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