



“GLIMPSES OF NARRATIVE GLORY IN TONI MORRISON’S BELOVED”

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison, a black African American novelist, is one of the most famous literary figures in contemporary African American Literature. Toni Morrison, a woman of many talents, comes from a long line of hard-working industrious black people who actively fought racial oppression and inferior social and economic status. She is the first African - American woman writer to have won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993.

Her works have been translated into more than twenty languages. Morrison has won national and international acclaim for works in which she examines the role of race in American society. Her works have been seen not only as exemplifying the struggle of a particular people but also as illustrating the problems and emotions of all human beings. Toni Morrison is admired for the use of language and her interesting narrative devices. Morrison’s fifth novel *Beloved* deals with slavery, emancipation and reconstruction. *Beloved* is a remarkable novel, which also illustrates the problems and emotions of all human beings. The Los Angeles Times called the novel a “master work” that should be kept “on the highest shelf in American literature.” *Beloved* is set in a small town Ohio in the years following the American Civil War. *Beloved* explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman, Sethe during the reconstruction era. Mistakenly believing that she will be taken back to slavery, Sethe murders her infant daughter, *Beloved*, to spare the girl a life in bondage. In *Beloved*, Sethe’s daughter returns from the grave after twenty years, seeking revenge for her death. *Beloved* marks the height of Morrison’s achievement, for it is a narrative that resists closure in numerous ways. Morrison’s writing is also characterized by its unique way of dealing with narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, a black African American novelist, is one of the most famous literary figures in contemporary African American Literature. Toni Morrison, a woman of many talents, comes from a long line of hard-working industrious black people who actively fought racial oppression and inferior social and economic status. Morrison’s novels develop a literary view of black American experience that is both fabulistic and realistic. She is the first African –

American woman writer to have won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Toni Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. In her Nobel Prize address she has said:

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin . What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company” (1993).

Morrison has written nine novels a collection of essays and lectures. Her works have been translated into more than twenty languages. Morrison has won national and international acclaim for works in which she examines the role of race in American society. Her works have been seen not only as exemplifying the struggle of a particular people but also as illustrating the problems and emotions of all human beings. Toni Morrison is admired for the use of language and her interesting narrative devices.

She is the first African-American to win the Nobel Prize, the first American woman to win it in fifty five years, and the eighth woman to win it since the Nobel Prize was initiated in 1901. Morrison's novels explore issues of African-American female identity in stories that integrate elements of the oral traditions, post-modern literary techniques, and magical realism to give voice to the experiences of women living on the fringes of white American society. Morrison's novels have been almost universally praised by many readers and critics, and have been the subject of numerous academic books and essays in the fields of gender studies, ethnic studies, and postmodern literary theory and culture studies.

Morrison's primary interest lies with the experiences of African-American women whose quest for individual identity has integrally intertwined with her community and its cultural history. Her novels are self-consciously concerned with myth, legend and oral tradition, as well as with memory, history and historiography. Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved* deals with slavery, emancipation and reconstruction. *Beloved* is a remarkable novel, which also illustrates the problems and emotions of all human beings. *The Los Angeles Times* called the novel a "master work" that should be kept "on the highest shelf in American literature." Morrison dedicated her *Beloved* novel, to the sixty million Africans, who, some historians believed, died during the middle passage to North and South America and the Caribbean. It is not only a great masterpiece but also the Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction, in the year 1988.

Margaret Atwood, for instance, called *Beloved* Toni Morrison's "another triumph" and indeed, in her *New York Times Review* article she said that, Morrison's narrative versatility and technical and emotional range appear to know no bounds. If there were any doubts about her stature as a pre-eminent American novelist, in her own or any other generation, *Beloved* will put them to rest. In three words or less, "It's a hair-raiser." *Beloved* is a novel which brings out Morrison's

intention to deconstruct slavery, racism, social and historical conventions and even language. She proves herself to be a post-modern writer.

Morrison re-tells history through the lives of ordinary people with women characters who struggle in a world created for convenience of others. Through these characters and lives of those around them, readers learn a history that cannot be found in textbooks. However, she focuses on the issues of slavery by fictionalizing the historical fact that slave mothers sometimes killed their children rather than allow them to become slaves. Such an event is recounted to produce a history of anonymous black men and women. Like Garner, Sethe kills her daughter and attempts to destroy her other children to prevent them from being recaptured as fugitives. Morrison says she wrote *Beloved* convinced that:

This has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean, its national Amnesia. (1989:120.)

Beloved is set in a small town Ohio in the years following the American Civil War. *Beloved* explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman, Sethe during the reconstruction era. Mistakenly believing that she will be taken back to slavery, Sethe murders her infant daughter, *Beloved*, to spare the girl a life in bondage. In *Beloved*, Sethe's daughter returns from the grave after twenty years, seeking revenge for her death. Through the use of flashbacks, fragmented narration, and myth, Morrison details the event that led to the crime and her refusal to seek expiation from the black community. The search to find narrative methods that resist the totalizing impulse of narrative and of readers themselves, is a central aspect of Morrison's fictional technique, and is certainly connected to her investment in an oral, African-American tradition of story-telling. *Beloved* marks the height of Morrison's achievement, for it is a narrative that resists closure in numerous ways. Morrison's writing is also characterized by its unique way of dealing with narrative. The narrative in Morrison's work is not always realistic. Morrison incorporates elements of myth, legend, passion, obsession, superstition, religion, nature, and the supernatural. Though she rejects the label of magical realism because it denies a clear cultural influence,

many aspects of her novels are characterized by elements of fantasy.

In a discussion with a group of Virginia Polytechnic Institute students in 1988, Morrison explained to them that one of her goals for this work was to acknowledge the reader's presence and participation in what she admitted was a difficult and painful story. Her strategy was in part an assurance of her meditative narrative presence. The signals of "telling" as a survival strategy—dialect, narrative recursion, suspension of time and place—are all in this text, especially in the compact and powerful passages where Sethe's, Denver's and *Beloved*'s voices are prosopopeic (re)memory. Morrison introduces this section with a particularly beautiful and haunting recollection of the elements of speech and the devices of narrative that black women writers have used so effectively. Therefore, the structures within African-American novels consistently defy the collected eventualities of time past, present, and future and, in consequence, a consideration of *aspect* may be a more appropriate frame to consider the chronicle of events in this story. Temporal time represents a narrow specific moment of occurrence. The relatively limited idea of time as being either in the past, the present, or the future is inadequate for a text like *Beloved*, where the pattern of events crises-cross through these dimensions and enlarge the spaces that they suggest.

Sethe's remembrance of her painful and hunting past is vivid and dramatic. She is the novel's dramatized narrator/protagonist conveying traumatic events poignantly in direct discourse. Sethe, like other characters in the novel, slips back into memories which suddenly replace her present moments as when she notes how much she loved her murdered daughter remembering that there it was again, welcoming the cool and unchiselled headstones. Sethe's grim reverie and dialogue with Paul D wins the reader's sympathies for her, despite her gruesome murder of the daughter, her attempt to kill her other three children, and her trading of sex on her daughter's grave with an engraver.

Toni Morrison's narrators consistently try to formulate or adopt a system of values appropriate to African-American experience. Their search leads to a keen sense of the complexities of human existence and it provokes at least one fairly recent critic to complain that Morrison fails to define the values that she apparently endorses. Morrison's fiction explored social, historical, psychological and moral issues, including the question of whether Christianity and

formal education help or prevent black people from problems of racial discrimination, family violence and incest stemming from pathological hatred or pathological love.

Through her narrative strategy, Morrison emphasizes the need for the characters to claim their past and to see that past as a shared, communal experience. Sethe believes that her daughter has returned to be with her. But most of all her monologue lays claim to *Beloved*:

Beloved, she is my daughter, she is mine see she come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now (236).

A reader of Morrison's fiction sees the conventional narrative patterns that she employs in the novel. The bildungsroman, the "initiation" story, and other similar genres, characterized by certain kinds of closure and narrated by conventional first and third person narrators, usually presuppose accessible "truth" about experience. Morrison uses these and other narrative forms that generate in the reader a variety of pre modern expectations, including faith in the narrator, at least a faith in the accessibility of truth through the overall work of art. She also draws from a variety of African folktale patterns in her work however; again she evades closure, which is a primary structural feature of such models.

Morrison develops ideas about art at a thematic level, and briefly considering of these ideas to a better understanding of the more complex issue of her narrative technique. First, her novels emphasize the magical power of art (indeed, several of her characters possess magical powers). Like magic, art reveals a destructive as well as constructive use. The destructive power resides in Morrison's characters particularly in seductive popular art such as blue songs and movies. Popular art invites people to enter into fantasy worlds where they may seek escape from reality, or they might also learn to apply the interpretative norms of fiction to life. A different sort of narrator-reader relationship develops, that is the narrator and the reader are simultaneously "corrupted by the messages" of human experience. Morrison's narrators and characters (not the author) are the locus of various kinds of uncertainty that become a subject of her fiction. Thus, it might be good to appreciate the complexity of her narrative management.

Morrison's employment of story-telling tradition entails a dialogic author, character and audience relation. The change of different perspectives in recounting a story represents the evident polyphonic nature of her fiction. The author admits the validity of the perception and consciousness of each character, without any authorial assurance and commentary on their viewpoints. So in Morrison's fiction, the narrator refrains from taking any character's stance or letting any character's ethical judgment control the narrative. In the narration of a story, each character participates with different bits of the same story, and thus the cognition of the story or the personality of the character is achieved in the process of improvisation in completing the whole story. In this recess, the call-and-response structure of narrative also invites the audience's anticipation in experiencing and creating. The multiple versions of Sethe's infanticide exemplify evidently the polyphonic nature. Among them, the Schoolteacher's version is certainly to be rejected because of his shameless racist view. Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs, being the fellow African Americans and having suffered the same evilness of slavery; express their complex perspectives on Sethe's violence. Thus, if Sethe's self-justification of killing for protection, suggests a mother's instinctive behavior and motherly love, Stamp Paid's narrative conveys the violent side of Sethe's behavior. Through these structural devices, Morrison challenges our tendency to appraise events and characters according to standards of morality in society.

CONCLUSION

Hence, Morrison's fiction exemplifies the dialogic interaction between the reader and the author. And the narrative conveys the author's ethical attitudes, which invite the reader to respond and to participate in the creation of the novel. By incorporating story-telling devices in her work, Morrison invites us into a communicative relationship between the author and the audience. Her novels exemplify the connection between narrative and ethical experience, and the dialogic author-audience relation. Moreover, the story-telling techniques cannot be separated from its ideological implications in delivering memories and experiences of the past. In fact, Morrison challenges our beliefs of morality. Her ethical treatment of the complex situation in *Beloved* deepens our understanding of racism which has not been so vividly described in any history book. Avoiding judgment on the character's difficult resolutions, Morrison actually condemns slavery and racism, which have led to

situations of mother's murdering of their children. Her literary treatment of the mother's difficult decision inspires us to reconsider the moral issues in our social life.

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