

Paradox of Love : Characters in Toni Morrison's Novels

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(Received October 29, 1999)

Inconsistency...the only thing

in which men are consistent.

—— Horace Smith. "The World Book Encyclopedia" 1996.

My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking.

—— Toni Morrison: "Conversations with Toni Morrison"

by Claudia Tate 1983.

1

It is widely acknowledged that *Paradise* (1997) is the final installment of a trilogy that began with *Beloved* (1987). That haunting story of a slave woman and mother, who loved her daughter so fiercely that she killed her rather than allowing her to be taken back into bondage by her pursuers. Then in 1992 it was followed by *Jazz*, in which the love of a man for a young woman turns violent in the Harlem of the 1920's. And finally Morrison, as if to conclude the trilogy, anatomized the form of love in *Paradise*, where she rather demonstrated a hunger for security and the desire to create perfection in an imperfect world.

If *Beloved*, the first runner of the trilogy, be a story of a mother' love for her child, and *Jazz* a story of a man's love for a younger woman, then *Paradise* would be a novel about a love for God, because no one can make it sure that what true love we seek look like unless we get to the world of a paradise.

In my subsequent discussion I want to show and claim how deeply Morrison explicated a variety of love in her fictions, which were all represented and

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demonstrated by these characters in her novels. It's true that her fictions are so strongly and deftly under-girded by her memories from the past, her people's history and their culture, but as I will depict in my following explications, her epoch-making literary devices, which are favorably acknowledged as characteristics of black literature in American literary cannon, are neither dispensable nor negligible. It is also important to remember that the solid theme recurring all through her novels is "love, and its absence." This theme, as Morrison admits in her several interviews, is the ever-lasting one of her fictional world.

2

From the beginning of her writing career Morrison has kept a keen but honest exploration of love of women as well as of men. To Jane Bakerman's question about her basic theme, Morrison responds as follows:

"Beauty, love ...actually, I think, all the time that I write, I am writing about love or its absence. Although I don't start out that way."⁽¹⁾

She recalls when she was writing *The Bluest Eye*, she thought she was writing beauty, miracles, and self-images, about the way in which people can hurt each other about whether or not one is beautiful. In *Sula*, she thought she was writing about good and evil. "But." She says. "I think that I still write about the same thing."

Although Morrison does concern about love and its absence, she also pay much attention to "love and how to survive ... not to make a living... but how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, *victims of something*."⁽²⁾

She has known that what *something* means. Also she knows that not only her people but we all of us, without any exceptions, have been victims of something in our own history; we had been tortured and sacrificed more or less by "something," which could be our traditional, feudalistic, social institutions, or racial, political, and gender oppressions, or even our narrow-minded ideals, or selfish desires of our "egos." Nevertheless we had kept love for each other as though we could survive with one. We had hope and dream to see our utopia or a paradise someday. What made us be able to survive under such harsh and severe realities seems to be "love" we had, still have, and will have.

Morrison, on the other hand, never forgets the other side of humanity: she mentioned that we have a lot of rage, a lot of violence; and what's worse, it comes too easily to us.

"The amazing thing to me is that there is so much love also." She says.
" And two things operate: One is that with the best intentions in the world, we can do enormous harm, enormous harm. Lovers and mothers and fathers and sisters, they can hurt each other a lot. Also , it always

amazes me that sometimes, when we have a choice, we take the best one! And we do the nicer thing. All about love, people do all sorts of things, under its name, under its guise. The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do."⁽³⁾

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly, Pecol's father, is a broken man, chained by poverty and circumstance, so he might love his daughter in the worst of all possible ways because he cannot do this and he cannot do that. He was confined in the boundaries of poverty and social rejection, and therefore cannot do it normally and healthily, so consequently it ended up this way (i.e. in the rape.) No need to say rape is such an awful thing, but that was only thing left for Cholly:

Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the only one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. (*The Bluest Eye* 159-60)

Another good examples of violence as distortion of love are demonstrated in her *Sula*(1973). Eva, one of her characters in this novel, for instance; she could jump out of the window for one daughter, but at the same time, she could burn up another child, all for love! Plum, her last baby, now a grownup and just returned from the war in Vietnam, 1967, could not adjust himself to the community and was a drug-addict. Eva, so much cared for him, decided to finish his life by burning him in the bed:

Eva confesses: "I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man." (*Sula* 72)

3

Once a woman came to decide if it would be better for her child, she could have killed her own baby. And the example of this "horrific love," as Terry Otten described it, is Sethe, a heroin in *Beloved*. Sethe killed her own little daughter because she hated to let her return to the slavery. But what she did was without any doubt a murder; among others, a murder of her own daughter. What about her

Motherhood? What about her love as a Mother? But as Morrison herself observed, sometimes "evil" is as useful as good and good looks like evil and vice versa.

Now before Morrison entered writing the novel *Beloved*, which was, as I stated before, the forerunner of the love trilogy, she had been obsessed by a few little fragments of stories of extraordinary black women: one was a newspaper clipping about a woman named Margaret Garner in 1851. She recalls: "It said that the Abolitionists made a great deal out of her case because she had escaped from Kentucky...with her four children. (And when the pursuers approached,) she had run off into a little woodshed right outside her house to kill them because she had been caught as a fugitive. And she had made up her mind that they would not suffer the way she had and it was better for them to die." Taking this fragment of a story into her creative imagination, Morrison developed it into *Beloved*. The other was when Morrison saw a picture in *The Harlem Book of the Dead* by Van der Zee. The photograph which intrigued Morrison featured an eighteen-year-old girl lying in a coffin. According to the photographer the girl had slumped to the floor at a party. When people around her asked what happened, she would only say "I'll tell you tomorrow." The girl died. Apparently shot by a jealous lover, and of course she knew this, but she kept her story until her lover could escape. She cared for him so much that she could with one supreme act forgive him for her murder and protect him from punishment. Out of this photograph Morrison drew a story in her imagination and it was developed into another novel *Jazz*.

Although Morrison's initial plan was to weave these two fragments into a single novel, it was changed at some point during its development. *Beloved* became the contemporary slave narrative, the fictionalized Margaret Garner, in which Morrison's concern was mostly on a woman's extraordinary capacity for love and sacrifice. Of course Morrison's queries are not what Sethe did or why. These answers are available to anyone with knowledge of slavery. Morrison inquires Who. Who is the woman capable of making such a choice? And her conclusion, I imagine, is that; Sethe is the kind of woman who loved something other than herself so much; she has placed all of value of her life in something outside herself, i.e. in her children. The genesis of Sethe's excessive love toward her children comes from Motherhood. However Sethe was just an ordinary slave woman, who did run away to escape from bondage of slavery. Barefoot, bleeding, hungry, exhausted, disoriented, she just struggled to reach Ohio, not so much to save her own life, but "the life of her children's mother." (30)

Then why did Sethe kill that precious child of her own? Morrison says: "It's the ultimate gesture of a loving mother. It's the outrageous claim of a slave."⁽⁴⁾

But still remain some queries: by killing her "beloved" child, has Sethe acted out of true love or selfish pride?

Sethe's love for her children was without doubt "risky," as Paul D, another character of this novel thought, because "for a used -to-be-slave woman to love

anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, Paul D knows, was to love *just a little bit.*" (53) But Sethe could not remain within the boundary of a slave woman's love. Her love exceeded it and trespassed it.

When Paul D asked if she returned to her former plantation, "Sweet Home," she said, "Oh, no. I wasn't going back there. I went to jail instead." (42) From the beginning it was clear that Sethe believes her actions were morally justified. The peculiarity of her statement lies in her omission of the fact that her moral stand was based upon the murder of her child and that she did not accept her show of mercy was also murder.

Probably we can understand the act of Sethe's ; killing her child might have been committed out of an irrational, hysterical, loving mother's need to protect her children, but Sethe's "claim" that she was justified in these actions are still hard to accept. Ultimately, it is Sethe who is responsible for her child's death, not slavery.

4

Morrison as a critic of love shows us how love varies from time to time and move each people differently: the sweetest love for you could be the worst one for somebody else. The good deed won't be always good; it might be an evil and confine you deeply into the tragedy.

When Morrison returned to the image of the dead girl in Van der Zee's photograph collection, it passed five years since *Beloved* was published. By this time Morrison's interest in the story related turned to a broader fascination with women's unselfishness... the willingness by some to value people they love more than themselves.

Why could Dorcas sacrifice herself in order to save her lover by refusing to name him as her murder?

A fifty-four-year-old Joe Trace, a married man who loves his wife, Violet, seduces and falls in love with an eighteen-year-old girl, Dorcas, and then shoots her when she leaves him. Then Violet crashes Dorcas's funeral to attack a girl who is already dead. Here Morrison moves to a review of the criminals. Crime and punishment however do not concern Morrison, but people and motivation do. What kind of man desires a girl young enough to be his daughter, even his granddaughter? Why does he harm her? What kind of a woman walks into a funeral in progress and assaults a dead body with a knife ? If they are not psychopaths, then they are merely interesting people and extraordinary specimens of the human condition: they are good people who do bad things.

In fact, Joe and Violet are two lonely people whose love for each other cannot penetrate dense walls of disappointment and pain. When he can no longer turn to his wife for companionship and intimacy, Joe looks for someone else and find

Dorcas. In a way Violet also finds her. After the shooting Violet obtains a photograph of the girl and places it on the living room mantle, where she and Joe take turns alternately admiring it and being moved to tears by it. For each the picture is a reminder of lost opportunities for living and loving: Dorcas is the mother Joe was never able to love and protect, and she is the daughter Violet never bore. In a peculiar way Dorcas's death is the bridge that links their paths back to each other. Sorrow bonds them and ultimately they are reconciled with their losses and renewed in life and love.

Dorcas's love for Joe, Joe's love for Dorcas, and Violet's love for Dorcas and Joe, these are quire and mythic love, but did save their spiritual agonies ... at least Joe could find his solace in the place of his mother's loss.

5

Morrison depicts those blurring borders of the earthly love, in which we, human beings, live and struggle. Love certainly blurs and changes in our world: it cannot be stable and always true for everybody, because it is not a divine love we can trust and believe. So when we are thrown into chaos, what will we do? Shall we kill each other only in order to survive? Or so that we can get security and certainty for our own sake? Can we obtain any console in the future?

Morrison's recent novel, *Paradise* deals with such an enigma of human beings: generational

The time of the novel is the 1970's, and the tiny, self-sufficient all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, has reached a crisis of conviction. Tracing its origins to the efforts of a strong and spiritual community of ex-slaves, Ruby prides itself on its uncompromising independence from the larger world. But the vicissitudes of the Sixties, from the Civil Rights movement to the Vietnam War, the counterculture to the generational conflict, inexorably touch Ruby and disturb its self-imposed isolation. In the scrub land outside of Ruby is an old Convent in which five women live, each seeking refuge and deliverance from a grim past. As the town's people begin to lose their own convictions and succumb to the uncertainties of the times, they come to identify these unknown women with evil, and to use the Convent as a scapegoat for the anger and conflict that have overtaken their town.

"Rumors had been whispered for more than a year. Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honey-moons. Two brothers shot each other

on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common. And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed . . . The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women." (*Paradise* 286)

Paradise actually begins with the arrival of these vigilantes from Ruby, only to assault the women for their scapegoat. And there fights occur, but the aftermath was mythic; when people from the town came to the place, no woman, dead or wounded, could be found there. And each woman's profile is kept being told on—Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, and Lone. At the end of the novel, Mavis, one of the Convent inhabitants meets her daughter Sally and they talk together about the past, resting on the shore:

" Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap. Ruined fingers troll the tea brown hair. ...Her emerald eyes adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them on the beach, sea trash gleams, Discarded bottle caps sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the quiet surf.
... Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise." (*Paradise* 318)

This closing description suggests us the possibilities of "unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home --- the ease of coming back to love begun." (318) Comfort and calmness finally enveloped them. And here in *Paradise* no women should shoulder the endless work which they had already done.

Here in *Paradise*, maybe we can find some hints or implications about divine love only if we, readers, do think and think together with her through the novel.

The opening line of the section of Divine read as follows:

"Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you ... Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. ... Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy, you are a fool. If you think it is natural, you are blind." (141)

Morrison presents us an image of a Paradise in her own mythic lyrical prose. If you believe this here world is "Paradise", it might be so, for you are here and you want it to be so. Morrison never decides this is this and that is that: everything is left for you to decide. We, the readers are always compelled to take them as our experiences, not of others' whom you don't care.

Morrison confesses: "I don't want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about, and I hope that I set it up in

such a way that it is a legitimate thing, and a valuable thing." Morrison always requires us the readers to take part in reading: she demands a participatory reading, and that is what literature should be.

6

Before I close my essay, let me touch Morrison's perspective of the literature in terms of black music. This is especially significant and indispensable when we read her novel *Jazz*.

She believes music and literature are same in their roots. Novels, essays, poems, fables, and many other forms of words are music if you have ears to listen to. Some novels leave you unsatisfied and in irritation because it did not give enough satisfaction for you and it was incomplete with the story. It is same with music. For example classical music satisfies and closes. Black music does not do that. Especially Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. Spirituals agitate you, no matter what they are saying about how it is all going to be. There is something underneath that is incomplete. There is always something else that you want from the music, and Morrison says that she wants her books to be like that, "because I want that feelings of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more that you cannot have it all right now. They don't give you all, they only give you enough for now. Or the musicians. They have the ability to make you want it, and remember the want. That is a part of what I want to put into my books. They will never fully satisfy ... never fully."⁽⁶⁾

Here again we are left alone unfilled, unsatisfied, and uncovered in the ocean of "literature" without any compass to direct us to any direction. All we have to do is to read and think and rethink the novel. The same thing could be associated with the issue of race. The beginning of *Paradise* was breath-taking sentence: "They shoot the white girl first." Since the conflicts between whites and blacks were so fierce and recurring in her novels, we are easily inclined to find who was the white girl. But it was of no value to do so, because we can understand that there is only a struggle against the use of racial categories, though it is paradoxical enough to admit.

As Morrison says in her interview with Amazon com, "Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing." This is so because *Paradise* overcame the issues of racial conflict --- at least in the minds of those characters in the novel.

Concluding:

Carolyn Denard writes, "Morrison has become a kind of literary Moses -- stripping away the idols of whiteness and of blackness that have prevented blacks in the United States from knowing themselves,"⁽⁷⁾

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Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. Alfred A. Knopf New York 1994
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Notes:

- (1) Jane Bakerman. "The Seams Can't Show: An Interview with Toni Morrison" *Conversation with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, University Press of Mississippi. 1994, p.30, p.34
- (2) Bakerman, p.30
- (3) Bakerman, p.34
- (4) Nellie McKay "An Interview with Toni Morrison" *Conversation with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie, University Press of Mississippi. 1994, p.138
- (5) McKay, p.136
- (6) Rodorigues Eusebio L. "Experiencing Jazz" *Modern Fiction Studies* No.39. 3&4
- (7) Carolyn Denard. "Toni Morrison" *Modern American Women Writers*. Ed. Elaine Showalter, Lea Baechler, and A. Walton Litz. Charles Scribner's Sons 1991. p.227

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