

Racial Tension and Cultural Shifts in Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*

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Abstract

The present study tries to establish the role of 'Racial Tension and Cultural Shifts among the protagonist of the short story of Toni Morrison. "Recitatif" is set during three different time periods, all of which saw notable racial tensions and shifts in culture within the United States. The first part of the story, when Roberta and Twyla are eight years old, takes place in the 1950s. The next stage of the story is set during the 1960s, when Roberta and Twyla are young adults. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and the Black Power movement gained momentum during this period, particularly following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Meanwhile, in 60s also saw a huge cultural shift, with the rise of a rebellious youthful counter-culture which was broadly defined by rejection of conservative social norms, progressive politics. "Recitatif" was written at the beginning of the Reagan era, it suggest that some of the social issues that were exacerbated during his presidency, such as an increased inequality between the quality of life of the wealthy and the poor. Meanwhile, despite the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling taking place in 1954, the 1970s and 1980s saw an increase in the use of busing as a method of forcing the racial integration of schools. Although it has subsided since the 1990s, the practice of busing is still in use today.

Keywords: Busing, Prejudice, Disabilities, Conflict, Race, Second Home, Power and Slavery.

This paper examines Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* how racism and cultural changes made the protagonists Twyla and Roberta suffers in orphanage. In their life shift of places led them to face vast cultural and racial bias. "Recitatif" was published in a period of increasing acceptance and celebration of African-American literature within global culture. That moment was ahead by several other key movements of the 20th century, such as the Harlem Renaissance. Some of major literary figures included Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes emerged and revealed their pain. Meanwhile, in the 1940s and 50s writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright explored themes of racism and segregation, thereby creating a sense of cultural momentum leading up to the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. The movement was established by Imanu Amiri Baraka, who, along with his wife Amina, edited the volume *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, in which "Recitatif" was first published. The Black Arts Movement sought to define aesthetic principles that were separate

from the white Western tradition, and to liberate black artists and writers from their dependency on white institutions such as universities and publishing houses. Some of the writers that made up the movement include Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou. Although not technically part of the Black Arts Movement, Toni Morrison is often associated with it, and her work is placed firmly within the greater African-American literary tradition.

The story opens with Twyla's declaration that she and Roberta were brought to the orphanage of St. Bonny's because Twyla's mother Mary danced all night and Roberta's mother was ill. When they are initially introduced they do not get along. Mary has taught Twyla to hold prejudiced views about people of Roberta's race, but when Twyla tells this to Big Bozo, Bozo rudely dismisses her. Eventually, the girls begin to bond over the fact that they understand each other without asking questions. They are also brought closer by the fact that they both get Fs "all the time" (25); Twyla can't remember anything she learns, and Roberta has not yet learned to read. They are also forced together by the fact that they are excluded from the rest of the children at St. Bonny's because they are not "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky." Sometimes, Twyla and Roberta are picked on by the older girls who wear makeup and seem scary but are in fact mostly vulnerable runaways. The older girls hang out in the orchard, where they listen to the radio and dance. Twyla often dreams of the orchard, but isn't sure why because "nothing really happened there," (33) except one incident in which Maggie fell down there. Maggie is a "sandy-colored" (38) old woman who works in the kitchen and has multiple disabilities. She is mute and possibly deaf, and has bow legs that cause her to rock and sway as she walks.

One Sunday, Mary and Roberta's mother come to attend a church service and lunch at St. Bonny's. Twyla and Roberta are excited about this prospect; they wear nice outfits and curl each other's hair. When Roberta introduces her mother to Twyla and Mary, however, Roberta's mother simply ignores them and walks away. Twyla is embarrassed further when Mary doesn't bring any food for them to eat, and wishes she could kill her. The story jumps eight years ahead in time. Twyla is working at a Howard Johnson's on the Thruway. One day, when a Greyhound Bus stops at the diner, Twyla notices that Roberta is among the passengers, accompanied by two young men. Roberta is wearing an outfit and makeup "that made the big girls look like nuns." The two women have a brief, casual conversation, but Roberta appears rude and disinterested, and scoffs when Twyla accidentally reveals that she doesn't know who Jimi Hendrix is. Roberta goes to leave without saying goodbye, but before she does Twyla asks how Roberta's mother is. Roberta replies that she is fine, asks after Mary, and leaves.

The narrative jumps another twelve years forward. Twyla is now married to a man named James whose family have lived in Newburgh for generations; the couple have a son named Joseph. Despite high rates of poverty, Newburgh is simultaneously gentrifying, and a gourmet market has opened in the city. Twyla visits out of curiosity, but feels anxious at the prospect of buying anything. She eventually resolves to buy only Klondike bars, because both her son and father-in-law love them. At the checkout, Twyla runs into Roberta, who is dressed elegantly and reveals that she now lives in the wealthy suburb of Annandale along with her husband and four stepchildren. Roberta suggests the two women have coffee. In the coffee

shop, the women hold onto each other tightly, giggling and “behaving like sisters separated for much too long” (155). They recall stories about their time at St. Bonny’s, and Roberta shows off that she has finally learned to read.

Twyla brings up Maggie, and Roberta claims that Maggie did not fall in the orchard, but was pushed by the gar girls. Twyla doesn’t believe her, but Roberta reveals that she knows because she went back to St. Bonny’s twice and ran away the second time. Twyla mentions the time at Howard Johnson’s when Roberta snubbed her, and Roberta blames her behavior on the racial tensions of the era. Twyla is confused, as she remembers many interracial groups of friends coming into the diner together, but brushes it off. The two women ask after each other’s mothers, promise to keep in touch, and part ways. Twyla explains that that fall, Newburgh was overcome by “racial strife” over the issue of forced integration through busing. One day, Twyla accidentally drives past a protest against busing, where she sees Roberta holding a sign that reads “MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!” (226). This compels Twyla to drive back and approach Roberta. The two women have a conversation about the protest that quickly descends into fierce and petty bickering. Eventually, some of the protesting women begin to rock Twyla’s car. She reaches her hand out for Roberta’s help, but Roberta doesn’t move.

After the women clear away, Roberta notes that she is a different person to who she was as a child, but that Twyla is the same—“the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground.” (259). Twyla, surprised, responds that Maggie wasn’t black. Roberta insists that she was, and that the two of them both kicked her. The women call each other liars, and eventually Twyla comes back to join a counter-protest, at which she waves a series of signs that directly address Roberta and don’t make sense to anyone else. The final sign reads: “IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?” (288), and this seems to cause Roberta to abandon the protest. With Roberta gone, Twyla chooses not to come back either.

More time passes. It is Christmas time, and Joseph is now in college. On her way back from buying a Christmas tree, Twyla decides to stop and get a cup of coffee. Near the diner she sees a group of wealthy people in eveningwear and admits “it made me tired to look at them.” Twyla goes into the diner, and here she finds Roberta, who has evidently come from the event at the hotel. Roberta asks to speak with her, and although she is resistant at first, Twyla eventually agrees. The women briefly exchange small talk, before Roberta admits that there is something she had promised herself she would tell Twyla if the two ever met again. Roberta admits that she truly thought Maggie was black, but that she knew all along that she and Twyla did not kick her—they just watched while the gar girls did it. However, Roberta adds that she really wanted the girls to hurt Maggie, which is just as bad.

“I don’t remember a hell of a lot from those days, but
Lord, St. Bonny’s is as clear as daylight. Remember Maggie?
The day she fell down and those gar girls laughed at her?”
Roberta looked up from her salad and stared at me.
“Maggie didn’t fall,” she said.
“Yes, she did. You remember.”

“No, Twyla. They knocked her down. Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes. In the orchard.”
“I don’t--that’s not what happened.”
“Sure it is. In the orchard.” (“Recitatif” 309)

Roberta starts crying and Twyla comforts her, suspecting that Roberta is upset because she is drunk. Twyla soothes her friend by reminding her that they were only eight-year-old children who were lonely. Roberta seems to feel a little better, and Twyla asks after her mother. Roberta sadly admits that she never got better, and Twyla says Mary never stopped dancing. However, at that moment Roberta is suddenly overcome with despair again, and the story ends with her exclaiming: “Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?” (388). “Recitatif” proves to be a noteworthy experiment which is “toying” with the reader’s emotions and effectively noting racial stereotypes and their characteristics. In her work of literary criticism “*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*” Morrison shows how language imposes stereotypes in literary works of classic American authors. In “Recitatif” she gives clues about racial identity of her characters and consequently forces the readers to consider the usual ways in which race are presented in literature.

The best way to conclude this examining in a fragment of *Playing in the Dark* which follows that she was struggling as a black writer. Her diction that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known. Her vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it. The only short story she had written, “Recitatif”, which was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial.

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