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ENG-L 354

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30 April 2020

Toni Morrison as a Postmodernist

Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" matches several defining qualities of postmodern literature, especially that of experimentation in structure and style. The story also conforms to some of the guidelines William Gass proposes in his manifesto, "The Medium of Fiction."

"Recitatif" is a dialogic and introspective recollection of events significant to the character-narrator Twyla. Her story revolves around her roommate Roberta, whom she meets at a state-run shelter for orphans. Four more times over the decades following their shelter stay, Twyla and Roberta meet again by accident. Twyla talks about each of those brief episodes.

Through Twyla's voice, Morrison makes one aware of three contemporary issues: public and personal racial tension, socio-economic divisions, and mother-daughter dynamics—but never by directly naming them as such. Twyla is not aware of these topics in the academic or political sense. She is merely describing situations as they occur.

The story begins with "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick" (2685). From this sentence and clues sprinkled later in the dialog, the reader learns that Roberta's mother suffers from mental illness and is often away for treatment. Twyla's mother, "simple minded as ever" according to Twyla, cannot stay focused on her daughter's welfare.

Twyla continues with “That’s why we were taken to St. Bonny’s. People want to put their arms around you when you tell them you were in a shelter, but it really wasn’t bad.” She shares her consciousness of race: “It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning--it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race” (2685). Throughout the story, even when describing a racially tense situation, Twyla never specifically identifies herself or Roberta as white or black.

By avoiding black and white labels, Morrison is dismantling artificially constructed racial binaries. Ignoring long-assumed so-called truths about human biological diversity, she is (in postmodern fashion) deconstructing the language, and therefore the thoughts normally induced by those labels. Morrison’s anti-binary theme exemplifies what philosopher William Gass says about concepts: “Like the mathematician, like the philosopher, the novelist makes things out of concepts. Concepts, consequently, must be his critical concern: not the defects of his person, the crimes on his conscience, other men’s morals, or their kindness or cruelty” (2489). William Gass places importance on the writer’s theme or main idea, saying the writer should pursue expression of a chosen concept without being distracted by internal or external forces obstructing the writer’s goal.

In addition to the anti-binary concept, issues of social pressure, fear, and guilt enter the story when Twyla recalls watching “the big girls [teens] dancing and playing the radio” in the orchard. “Maggie fell down there once. ...And the big girls laughed at her. We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared of those girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil. Maggie couldn’t talk. ...I think she was born that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen” (2686). This scene

haunts both Twyla and Roberta throughout the story, gaining new significance as they grow older and talk about it.

Another concept, that of socio-economic differences, also appears in the first episode of the story. Roberta's economic situation is better than Twyla's, at least in the area of food supply. Twyla mentions her feelings about food at the shelter:

The food was good, though. At least I thought so. Roberta hated it and left whole pieces of things on her plate: Spam, Salisbury steak—even jello with fruit cocktail in it, and she didn't care if I ate what she wouldn't. Mary's idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo. Hot mashed potatoes and two weenies was like Thanksgiving for me. (2686)

Twyla's mother, Mary, evidently lives at a poverty level causing Twyla to experience food insecurity. Twyla has thoughts about the unfairness of food distribution, saying, "Things are not right. The wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that's why I got into waitress work later—to match up the right people with the right food" (2689).

How Twyla expresses food concerns is typical of her voice in the story. She describes events simply and directly, as she remembers them. At no time do we sense the author interjecting her own voice to explain anything or to set a scene. Morrison's method of letting a character speak in everyday language matches another William Gass manifesto point:

A dedicated storyteller...will...[follow] as closely as he can our simplest, most direct and unaffected forms of daily talk, for we report real things, things which intrigue and worry us, and such resembling gossip in a book allows us to believe in figures and events we cannot see, shall never touch, with an assurance of safety which sets our passions free. (2491)

Gass is saying the power of simple and direct or writing made comfortable for the reader is more dramatic and has a stronger effect than formally structured prose. The reader will trust the story enough to feel an imaginative and emotional reaction.

Morrison uses no section breaks or transition phrases to segue into the second episode of Twyla's story. After describing the day Roberta left the shelter, Twyla continues in the next paragraph with: "I was working behind the counter at the Howard Johnson's on the Thruway just before the Kingston exit" (2689). Morrison does not explain that Howard Johnson was the largest restaurant chain in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s, which (along with the reference to highway travel) places the story firmly in the contemporary period. Many Postmodern literature authors often omit explanations and details that might slow the flow of a story. William Gass encourages this unconcern with such detail in his manifesto: "For most people, fiction is history; fiction is history without tables, graphs, dates, imports, edicts, evidence, laws; history without hiatus—intelligible, simple, smooth" (p. 2490). As Gass would encourage, Morrison's postmodernist fragmentation provides no mention of dates and timing, no explanation of historic facts, and offers minimum contextual description surrounding events.

The reunion at Howard Johnson does not go well for Twyla. Roberta acts rudely and with snide superiority during their brief conversation while sharing private laughs with her companions about Twyla's appearance in her uniform. After an uncomfortable pause, Roberta says:

"We're on our way to the Coast. He's got an appointment with Hendrix." She gestured casually toward the boy next to her.

“Hendrix? Fantastic,” I said. “Really fantastic. What’s she doing now?”

Roberta coughed on her cigarette and the two guys rolled their eyes up at the ceiling. “Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix, asshole. He’s only the biggest—Oh, wow. Forget it.” (2690)

This dialog humiliates Twyla. She is completely unaware of the rock music scene, including the fame of black performer-song writer Jimi Hendrix. The entire conversation exposes the social gap between herself and Roberta. After this unpleasant exchange, Twyla resorts to a standard good-bye.

“How’s your mother?” I asked.

Her grin cracked her whole face. She swallowed. “Fine,” she said. “How’s yours?”

“Pretty as a picture,” I said and turned away. (2690)

These comments made about their mothers may be false. Twyla and Roberta are keeping up appearances and making light throw-away remarks expected in polite conversation. An underlying concern about mothers continues throughout the story.

Twyla and Roberta meet for the third time, again by happenstance, at a posh up-scale grocery emporium. For Twyla, it is a curiosity visit and she cannot really afford to shop there. The new store is part of a renovation movement initiated by well-off people from the suburbs who are migrating into one of Newburgh’s urban renewal neighborhoods. Roberta has become part of that affluent crowd by marrying into it; she is “dressed to kill,” as befitting that status.

This meeting with Roberta is more friendly than the one twelve years ago at the Howard Johnson. After exchanging several other state shelter memories, they talk about an old deaf-mute woman who was working there. Twyla opens the topic.

“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. Remember how scared we were?”

“Wait a minute. I don’t remember any of that.” (2693)

Twyla is incredulous; she cannot believe what Roberta is saying. When they part, she reflects, “Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn’t forget a thing like that, Would I?”

Morrison uses this exchange to insert a concept about the power of verbal suggestion and the harm it can produce. Twyla is now deeply disturbed by Roberta’s claim that Maggie was attacked. For the reader and for the character portrayed in text, a painful concept or recollection can have lasting effect, as explained by William Gass:

Concepts... invade us as we read, and they achieve, as our resistance and their forces vary, every conceivable degree of occupation. Imagine a worry or a pain, an obsessive thought, a jealousy or hate so strong it renders you insensible to all else. Then while it lasts, you are that fear that ache, for consciousness is always

smaller than its opportunities, and can contract around a kernel like a shell.

(2491)

Gass talks about being occupied by negative and harmful thoughts and feelings that block our awareness of external events while we are reading. When in the grip of such a fictional obsession, we are temporarily not open to other ways of thinking.

Twyla does not continually obsess over Roberta's view of events, but she is haunted by the question sporadically over the next few years. The subject returns when she and Roberta have their fourth encounter, this time at the scene of an anti-bussing picket line in front of her son's junior high school. Twyla is in her car and Roberta is outside with the picketers. After a contentious exchange about the racially charged bussing issue, Roberta throws one more volley:

“Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot.”

“She wasn't black,” I said.

“Like hell she wasn't, and you kicked her. We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream.”

“Liar!” (2695)

Much later, after getting over the question of whether Maggie was black and whether she kicked Maggie, Twyla realizes there is a more significant point to acknowledge about herself:

I tried to reassure myself about the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn't kick her; I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to. We

watched and never tried to help her and never called for help. Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use. ...And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't ---just like me—and I was glad about that. (2697)

At last, Twyla understands how seriously Mary's poor mothering skills affected her childhood behavior. In a moment of self-analysis, she recognizes how her eight-year old mind substituted her mother into the scene concerning Maggie. By not helping Maggie, Twyla was punishing Mary. This revelation or conscious awareness is an important part of Morrison's story concept.

William Gass discusses two points about presenting consciousness. The first is about the author's consciousness and whether it should be a part of fiction. "He [the author] will avoid recording consciousness since consciousness is private—we do not normally "take it down" – and because no one really believes in any other feelings than his own" (2491). In other words, a reader is not necessarily interested in how the author is feeling or what she is thinking. The author should not interject personal consciousness items into her novels and short stories.

The second Gass point about consciousness appears to be for enhancing the reader's experience. "The purpose of a literary work is the capture of consciousness, and the consequent creation, in you, of an imagined sensibility, so that while you read you are that patient pool or cataract of concepts which the author has constructed..." (2491). If the author writes well, the reader is taken out of their immediate reality and into the world of the story's character, including her thoughts. Those thoughts follow the

direction of the author's concept or theme. There is a difference between the author's concept and the author's personal consciousness.

Morrison, through Twyla, also presents Roberta's consciousness. Twyla's story comes full circle five or six years later when she and Roberta meet unexpectedly for the fifth and last time at a coffee shop. Roberta confesses her lies about Maggie. She admits she cannot be sure if Maggie was black or not, and goes on to say:

I just remember her as old, so old. And because she couldn't talk—well, you know, I thought she was crazy. She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day—wanting to is doing it. (2698)

Roberta's thoughts about the Maggie incident are like Twyla's. Both women now realize they had transferred feelings about their mothers into their perceptions of Maggie. All past remarks about their cultural, socio-economic, and racial differences seem now to be insignificant when weighed against their shared childhood traumas.

Exploring the different ways Twyla and Roberta react to Life's stumbling blocks brings one to the realization that beneath our cultural and social attitude differences, people feel the same kinds of pain and share the same worries. Toni Morrison gives us this important piece of literature as a unique way to affirm that we are all human.

Works Cited

Gass, William. "The Medium of Fiction." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*

Since 1945. 7th ed., vol. E, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, pp. 2488-2492.

Morrison, Toni. "Recitatif." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature Since 1945*.

7th ed., vol. E, W.W. Norton & Company, 2007, pp. 2685-2698.

Dear Cynthia, This is a brilliant reading of "Recitatif" through a very difficult philosophical framework! I am very impressed. The only suggestions I have if you wanted to revise it at some point would be to develop some of the paragraphs/points: the shorter paragraphs tend to be underdeveloped. When directly quoting lengthy passages, work to expand your discussion of the same. There were only a few instances in which I would recommend more development in terms of discussion--not analysis: your analysis is masterful (brilliant connections), very beautiful, and your writing voice is captivating. Very fine work throughout the semester!

Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick, May 10 at
9:27pm