The Structure of Story in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

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SOURCE: Peter Schakel and Jack Ridl, *Approaching Literature in the 21st Century: Fiction, Poetry, Drama*

What do stories do? Some are told to entertain, some to inform or instruct, some to mislead. And sometimes the way a story is structured creates ambiguities that make it difficult to tell which of these it is doing. That is the case with Toni Morrison's story "Recitatif." The structure of Twyla's story, and that of Roberta's stories within it, hold a reader's attention and leave a reader questioning not only race but what happened to Maggie.

Thesis sentence states central idea.

The structure relates to the kind of story this is. Robert Stepto points out that many African-American authors "choose to see themselves as storytellers instead of storywriters" (qtd. in Goldstein-Shirley 101) because they distrust readers, and want people to *listen* to what they have to say. "Recitatif" falls into that category: "Although the text is written," David Goldstein-Shirley notes, "its structure mimics oral storytelling" (101). He goes on to spell out the effect of that form: "The distinctively 'oral' quality of 'Recitatif' also contributes to the story's strategy of recruiting the reader in its mission to deconstruct racism" (101).

Use of indirect secondary source (quoted in another source) to set up argument.

The story, in fact, has two storytellers. Twyla is the overall storyteller. The story begins with her: "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick" ("Recitatif" 300). Twyla is a limited narrator, an outsider in her own story, lacking the understanding of things that Roberta possesses from the start ("I liked the way she understood things so fast"--"Recitatif" 301). As a result, Elizabeth Abel believes, Twyla "feels vulnerable to Roberta's judgment" (473). Twyla's story provides a frame, within which we also hear stories told by Roberta, which often conflict with Twyla's, thus creating tension between the two and forcing the reader to sort out differences and attempt to find the truth.

Clear topic sentences are used throughout the paper.

Secondary source quoted to advance argument, with signal phrase naming author.

One of the things readers must grapple with is race. Twyla and Roberta are of different races: "we looked like salt and pepper standing there," Twyla says ("Recitatif" 301). But which is white and which is black is never stated. The reader's desire to know is paralleled later in the story by the girls' attempts to determine the race of the servant Maggie (Bennett 212). Morrison creates a racial ambiguity that, Lisa Cade Wieland argues, grows out of linguistic ambiguity: "'Recitatif'

Primary text quoted to back up assertion.

Secondary source quoted to expand point.

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becomes an experiment in language, as Morrison considers whether a story can be written without the linguistic short cuts habitually employed in American literature to categorize and to stereotype its characters" (280). Race is important to our identities, Anthony Appiah concludes (499), and in that respect it is a central issue in the story. Yet the reader is not allowed to fall back on familiar language and comfortable stereotypes in understanding that issue.

Secondary source summarized.

Transition to Part 2.

These discrepancies and ambiguities come to bear especially on their stories about Maggie. Both girls identified to some extent with Maggie. Maggie is, as one critic states, "the lowest person in the hierarchy" (Holmes). Similarly, Twyla and Roberta were looked down upon by other children at the orphanage because "we weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky" ("Recitatif" 301). As Maggie is mute, so the two girls while at St. Bonny's have no voice. This does not, however, lead them to bond with Maggie. On the contrary, they attempt to separate and distance themselves from her emotionally because, Jan Furman says, she makes them feel inadequate and helpless. The result was that, "Without realizing it, however, in hating Maggie, they hated themselves and each other" (Furman 110). That hatred leads them to remember Maggie differently, and thus the stories they tell are different.

No page number for Web source.

Shortened citation of primary text: no need to repeat "Morrison."

Paraphrase and quotation of secondary source to advance argument.

The first story about Maggie occurs when, years after St. Bonny's, they cross paths at the Food Emporium. They have lunch and as they reminisce about the orphanage, Twyla says,

Extended block quotation sets up further discussion of Maggie.

> "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)

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The discrepancies bother Twyla ("Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn't forget a thing like that. Would I?"--"Recitatif" 310) and create ambiguity for the reader. Which story is correct, Roberta's or Twyla's (or neither)? Are they remembering details about Maggie differently because one of them is the same race as Maggie and the other not? If so, which one is the same?

Series of questions to be explored in rest of paper.

Conflicting stories about Maggie appear again the next time they meet, later that year, outside a school at which Roberta is picketing against busing children to achieve racial balance. They have a bitter exchange about forced integration, in which Roberta blurts out to Twyla, "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" ("Recitatif" 312). Twyla tells a different story: "Maggie wasn't black" ("Recitatif" 312), and she hadn't kicked Maggie: "I know I didn't do that, I couldn't do that" ("Recitatif" 313). On further thought, she remains convinced about the kicking, but not about the race: "When I thought about it I actually couldn't be certain" ("Recitatif" 313). The reader is left to figure out why Roberta said this to Twyla, how much of it is true, and how racial difference affects their different memories.

Summary of primary text.

Quotation of primary text to highlight crux in story.

Maggie stories emerge also in the last meeting with Roberta that Twyla tells about. The last time they meet in the story is at least a year later when Twyla stops at a downtown diner for coffee after shopping for a Christmas tree and Roberta sits with her for a few minutes. Roberta now backs away from her previous story: she acknowledges that Twyla didn't kick Maggie--neither of them did, only the gar girls did. The exchange brings out a parallel between Roberta and Twyla: each had wanted to kick Maggie because each identified Maggie with her mother as well as with herself. For Twyla, "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" ("Recitatif" 313). Roberta thought Maggie was crazy, like her mother, and had "been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too"

Primary text summarized at length to provide context.

Quotations of primary text to bring out key points.

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(Recitatif" 314). Neither girl could accept her own mother, just as neither could accept Maggie: the reminders of the pain their mothers inflicted were too much to bear.

Secondary source summarized.

Title included in citation because two works by Morrison appear in Works Cited.

The structure of story creates ambiguity in racial codes, and does not attempt to resolve it. It is too complex to fit the conventional language and stereotypes. Each girl constructed a racial identity for Maggie out of her own cultural and racial context, and we as readers are tempted to do the same (Abel 471–72). What this story does is to show how literature can bring readers into a work, "the ways writers . . . tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their text" (Morrison, *Playing* 4). Readers are given the language, which takes them through the story and finally leads them to the point of realizing that this story will not provide answers to their questions, and that acceptance of ambiguity itself answers the need to have answers.

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