The women looked down from the rafters of the trees and stopped murmuring. They were delighted when they first saw her, thinking a runaway child had been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently. This girl was fighting to get away from them. The women hanging from the trees were quiet now, but arrogant - mindful as they were of their value, their exceptional femaleness; knowing as they did that the first world of the world had been built with their sacred properties; that they alone could hold together the stones of pyramids and the rushes of Moses's crib; knowing their steady consistency, their pace of glaciers, their permanent embrace, they wondered at the girl's desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were.
Chapter 4

Tar Baby:
The Desolate Canvas of Black Life

What we are seeking is what is different about us now; and within the spectacle of this difference the sudden flash of an unfindable identity. No longer a genesis, but the deciphering of what we are in the light of what we are no longer.

- Pierre Nora

In *Tar Baby* Morrison depicts the struggle within the soul of one woman - Jadine - to reconcile her black origins with her upbeat white lifestyle. This is her only book in which white characters occupy certain key positions, and play an active role in the life of the black protagonist. Valerian and Margaret Street are depicted as the generous employers of Sydney and Ondine, and happily patronise their young niece, Jadine, the central character of *Tar Baby*. The emphasis of the book, however, is not so much on black-white relations, as on the complications arising out of the complex class structure within the black subculture while the representatives of the majority culture look on - now with amusement, now with disgust - sometimes passing judgement, sometimes reserving it. The classes within the black subculture are represented by Jadine who is considered “Yella” or almost white - and belongs on the top rung of the ladder, Sydney and Ondine who are true blooded “Philadelphia” Negroes, and occupy the second rung, Son who is an uneducated “Nigger” from a minuscule black
town - and occupies the third rung, and Therese and Gideon, illiterate, native poor blacks belonging to the category of servants, and consequently occupying the last rung of the coveted societal ladder. Marilyn Sanders Mobley rightly observes that "Tar Baby articulates the intergenerational tensions within the black community and redefines black female womanhood not in terms of biology but in terms of the choices women make" (620). The conflicts depicted in the book are not just between generations, however, but also between the variety of classes mentioned above, and represented by the various characters in Tar Baby. The concept of choice is significant because the options that one chooses either lead ultimately to the tensions between various generations and classes, or help resolve them.

Dubbed the "Copper Venus" by fashion Avatars, Jadine is depicted as a high class model who has carved a remarkable niche for herself in the highly competitive and cosmopolitan world of fashion dominated by white people. Thanks to Valerian Street, her benefactor, she has been educated and trained in Paris, and is a successful Art History graduate of the Sorbonne - a privilege uncommon even among upper class whites. Since she has lived mostly in cosmopolitan cities like New York and Paris, her tastes

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are 'refined' (read upper class white) rather than 'down home' (read ethnic black). According to Mobley, "Morrison's dilemma in Tar Baby is how to narrate the quest of the contemporary black female hero when she happens to be a cultural orphan, one whose sense of self is based upon a denial of her own cultural heritage and an identification with one that is not her own." Even though Morrison herself uses the term "cultural orphan" for Michael, it suits Jadine better because she has grown up parentless and, because her early initiation was into the white value system, she is cultureless as well - at least from the African American point of view. This chapter seeks to trace the course of Jadine's developing race and class consciousness - mostly through her interaction with other characters - both black and white, but more specifically through her short but extremely involved and passionate relationship with Son. The following paragraphs will also seek to demonstrate that the places that Jadine visits or lives in - the Caribbean Islands, Eloe, Paris, and New York City - also play an important role in the development of her race and class consciousness, and have a direct impact on the formation of her sensibility.

Jadine is first introduced as a successful model who has come

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to visit her aunt and uncle at the posh Caribbean mansion of the Streets where she is immensely pampered by both Sydney and Ondine as well as Valerian and Margaret. She is on a sort of vacation where she hopes to think things over. At this time, the questions going through her mind appear to be those that might riddle the brain of any twenty-five year old at the peak of her career: whether she should marry the white European man who has given her a priceless seal skin coat, whether she should marry at all, and whether to continue modelling or start her own business. Her adoring aunt and uncle are all praise for her phenomenal achievements, and it is here that Morrison subtly demonstrates that black people are conscious of their own race and colour as something separate and distinct from that of their white counterparts when Ondine tells Jadine that her modelling photographs in famous French magazines "made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page" (Tar Baby 37). It seems to matter more that Jadine outshines models who are white - rather than the fact that they are just good models. Jadine, however, lets the statement go without comment, and the reader has no way of gauging her views on the issue. Later that night, however, she lies awake in bed and recalls an incident in a super

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3 Toni Morrison, Tar Baby (London: Picador in association with Chatto and Windus, 1993). All subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in
market in Paris where she had come across an extraordinary black woman who had shunned with one look, one action, all that she had ever stood for.

The vision itself was a woman much too tall. Under her canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too much bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed?...The woman walked down the aisle as though her many-coloured sandals were pressing gold-tracks on the floor....Jadine followed her profile, then her back as she passed the store window....And there...Turned those eyes too beautiful for eyelashes on Jadine and, with a small parting of her lips, shot an arrow of saliva between her teeth down to the pavement and the hearts below. (42 - 43)

This incident marks a turning point in the development of Jadine's race and class consciousness. It comes at a time when she is riding the waves of success, and is particularly pleased with herself because she has been chosen for the cover of Elle - the famous French magazine, has satisfactorily completed her dissertation orals,
and three handsome young men are knocking her door down - ready to
wine, dine or marry her. Even so, all these accomplishments
combined are not enough to counter the forlorn feeling this moment
of encounter with the woman in yellow gives rise to. It is a crucial
incident because it makes her feel unimportant and guilty for the
first time in several years. She feels chastised and belittled not
only because the woman does not look at her with the awe and
admiration she is used to seeing in the glances of ordinary people,
but also because she even spits on the pavement while seeming to
be condemning everything that was so precious and priceless to
Jadine only seconds ago. It is almost as if the woman has spat in
her face. Jadine wonders what it is about her that draws such
disapproval from this woman. Perhaps she is contemptuous of the
clichéd image of the ideal American beauty that she is so
enthusiastically portraying - while forgetting or neglecting her own
black beauty and, by implication, her African connections. As
Jadine recollects the incident, she cannot imagine why the
experience had disturbed and shaken her so much. "She couldn't
figure out why the woman's insulting gesture had derailed her -
shaken her out of proportion to incident. Why she had wanted that
woman to like and respect her...The woman made her feel lonely in
a way. Lonely and inauthentic" (44-45). Perhaps Jadine feels
inauthentic because her taste and deportment show a leaning toward Western and European standards - symbolised by her liking Ave Maria better than Gospel music, and preferring Picasso to an Itumba mask. The woman in the supermarket, however, holds her ethnic blackness with pride, and for all the bulkiness of her big body, is still able to convey a sense of the ethereal in her fluid movements. Roberta Rubenstein observes that "in her incongruity, the woman is a manifestation of Jadine's alter ego: beneath Jade's regal elegance lies a fear of her ancestral African roots and contempt for her social inferiors, as well as anxiety about her female role and her sexuality"(140). Though Rubenstein is right about Jadine's fear of her ancestral roots and, by implication, the black culture, because both threaten the identity she has worked hard to create, her claim that she is contemptuous of her social "inferiors" cannot be wholly justified. One might recall that in spite of feeling threatened and being afraid when Son first touches her forcefully, she does not complain to Valerian because she does not want a black man to have to face humiliation at the hands of a white man, and so keeps quiet about the incident. Even in Eloë, much later, she makes an effort to mingle with the local women and girls even though she feels extremely uncomfortable in their midst.

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4 Roberta Rubenstein, "Pariahs and Community," Gates and Appiah 140.
Jadine has deliberately and consciously chosen the kind of life she is now living and, for her, it is not just a question of fancying a certain kind of music or art over another. Inherent in these preferences, rather, is a certain type of acculturation - an initiation into the dominant culture which is supposedly taking her away from her roots - but she is not unaware of the subtle implications of these choices. She has, in fact, been conscious of them since her teenage years, as one later finds out when she recalls her meeting with Michael in which he had chastised her for moving away from her ethnicity, for leaning toward white preferences rather than those more in keeping with her black heritage. "I knew the life I was leaving....But he did want to make me apologize for what I was doing, what I felt. For liking 'Ave Maria' better than gospel music...." (72). Jadine feels that she has chosen rightly, and sees no need to be apologetic about it. Her recollection of the encounter with the woman in yellow, however, first draws attention to the conflict within her. Her life may have been progressing fast and smoothly before, but this encounter makes her stop and think. It makes her question the validity of that lifestyle and those values - as well as the quality of the success that belongs to her. She could easily have ignored the incident as something not worth bothering about since the woman was one to whom the modelling agency
would not have given even a second look, and at whom the world of high fashion would have chuckled with disrespect. Jadine, however, takes the encounter seriously, and feels guilty for being what she is - a 'black white' if one may say so. This encounter is similar to Pecola's encounter with Mr. Yacobowski and Sula's overhearing her mother saying that she loves her but does not like her. These incidents mark a change in the life and thinking of these protagonists because the words and gestures of these people - whether familiar or unknown - make them rethink their lives and values, and question the validity of their choices or behaviour.

The second turning point in the development of Jadine's consciousness comes when she meets Son and, after an initial period of fear, anger and fascination, goes for a picnic with him. She is wearing a white dress, symbolic of her attitudes and identification with white Americans and Europeans, and when she falls in the marsh, the dress becomes muddy and black - signifying the beginning of her submersion into black culture. It is a forced beginning, however, because she falls into it accidentally and unwillingly. Her association with Son compels her to view other black people from another class, from another subculture (which, ironically, is rightfully her own culture), in a different light - as decent, rational human beings whose pre-occupations may be
different from hers, but are just as important nevertheless - a fact she acknowledges but cannot understand - as is borne out by her visit to Eloe. Her desperate attempts to emerge safely out of the marsh foreshadow her struggles in Eloe where she feels that she is trapped in a web of blackness in an atmosphere that is trying to suck her inside, and to merge her identity with its own. Her experience of clinging to a tree, and being observed by the tree women is also a precursor to the reception that she will meet in Eloe. Just as the tree women first think that one of their own kind has been brought back to them, so the women of Eloe look to her with keen expectations of adopting her into their midst. After observing her attempts to get out of the marsh, however, the tree women that she “was fighting to get away from....wondered at the girl’s desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were” (184). In the same way, the men and women of Eloe, including Son, too wonder why she does not want to be part of their origins and culture, but has adopted, instead, an entirely different way of life. Mobley comments that the “women in Eloe represent her familial past, while the women in the trees...represent historical tradition....All these women symbolise Jadine’s refusal to define herself in terms of familial past, historical tradition and cultural heritage. In rejecting these women, she
rejects the very sources that could teach and nourish her.\footnote{Mobley, Gates and Appiah 289.} The assumption here is that Jadine cannot become a complete person - an individual worth her weight on this earth until she surrenders herself to the arms of African history and culture, and dons, as it were, a mantle of ethnicity in place of the garb of whiteness inside which she is presently ensconced. Just as she finds it hard to scrape the marshy blackness off her legs, so it is difficult for her to emerge untouched, unscathed from her contact with the woman in yellow, the women of Eloë, the tree women, the night women and, of course, Son. It is not surprising, therefore, that Son is not the one who ultimately pulls her out of the marsh - because eventually, it is he who is to later introduce her to old-fashioned black lifestyles and encourage her to be part of the culture to which she rightfully belongs. Her going out with him and getting caught in the marsh is but an introduction to her initiation into black life, via Son, that is soon to follow.

The close encounter with Son brings about a change in Jadine's thinking. She is surprised at herself when she finds herself defending him against Margaret. She is surprised when she finds herself feeling jealous of Margaret because he hid in her closet and not her own. She finds herself feeling angry with Margaret for
thinking that he would rape her.

Jadine...discovered she was jealous of Margaret of all people. Just because he was in her closet, she thought his sole purpose in life was to seduce her. Naturally her. A white woman no matter how old, how flabby, how totally sexless, believed it and she could have shot him for choosing Margaret’s closet and giving her reason to believe it was true. (187)

A subtle change has already come about because of Son’s forced intrusion at L’Arbe de la Croix. The placid order of the Street household has been disturbed. Jadine, the “social secretary,” now views her white female employer with slightly different eyes. Gone is the feeling of fearful camaraderie that Son’s initial discovery had raised in both. Black is on the side of black, and white has become the ‘other.’ Just as Son had accused Jadine of being white when she thought he was going to molest her, so now she thinks that it is so typical of a white woman to imagine that a black man is hiding in her closet with the sole intention of raping her. Later, Jadine also feels uncomfortable when Margaret refers to Son as “gorilla” even though she herself looks upon him as a “nigger,” and adds that they would have been scared even if the intruder had been white. This episode illustrates that a slight but sure change has come about in
Jadine's thinking. Her association with Son has created in her a slight awareness about her own people. This consciousness is only in its primitive state however and, as the novel progresses, the reader is able to chart its movement to see how far it goes, the point at which it ceases to matter, and whether or not it affects the choices she makes later in life.

After their flight from L'Arbe de la Croix, following the disastrous Christmas dinner, Jadine and Son spend a few idyllic days in New York City, totally absorbed in each other, blissfully unaware of the real world outside their cosy little apartment. For the first time in her life, Jadine begins to feel safe, protected and "unorphaned." In terms of the development of her consciousness, this is another milestone. It is significant that this brief contact with Son and, by implication, her African roots and ethnic heritage, gives her what years of the "best" education and material success could not - the feeling of ultimate well-being, happiness and security. She lets Son take care of her, and looks after him in return. In his company, therefore, she begins to think, for once, of people other than herself. This is also borne out by her willingness to accept the girl Son had rescued from the streets of New York City into her apartment. These idyllic days are, however, short-lived, and the next turning point in the formation of Jadine's
consciousness comes when Son takes her to his all black hometown - Eloe, Florida, where she feels out of place in every way, and all her doubts and apprehensions surface again. Her dress and deportment make people stare at her with curiosity and disbelief. Jadine feels just as uncomfortable in the midst of the natives of Eloe as they do about having her in their midst. It is unfortunate that she has never been exposed to this side of the black population, and the inhabitants of Eloe are alien to her. When Son leaves her with a bunch of women, girls and lazing men, she feels deserted because she is not used to being sidelined like this - having to stay with the women while the men go off to do the important work. She has nothing to say to the over-awed, curious females, and feels lost because she has not even been able to understand the dialect that Son uses to speak to them. When all attempts at normal conversation fail, Jadine finally resorts to modern techniques. The camera bails her out just when she thinks that she is going to go crazy. It is ironic that she, a model used to posing for the best photographers in the business, tries to take pictures of small town Florida - tries to capture, at least on film, the ordinariness and essence of a way of life she herself can never understand or identify with. She yearns for the kind of fast and busy life she has always known and loved. "She needed air, and taxi cabs and conversations
in a language she understood. She didn’t want to have any more discussions in which the silences meant more than the words did” (262). By demonstrating this particular yearning of Jadine’s for the routine, modern life she is used to living in New York, Morrison points to the shallowness of her way of life. The conversations she is used to having with her ultramodern circle may be entertaining, but they are superficial because they only have literal meanings - unlike the hushed but loaded discussions held in Eloe where the unspoken word is more important than the spoken one. This failure to receive these silently communicated messages makes Jadine realise her inability to comprehend her culture and origins. She can understand the language of whites, but the language of black America is Swahili to her. She feels claustrophobic and trapped - a feeling very similar to the way she felt when she was caught in the marsh. Just as Son had not pulled her out of the marsh, so he does not take her out of Eloe. She leaves on her own - earlier than Son, who promises to meet her in New York. The sense of alienation had been so strong that she begins to feel both afraid and threatened - feelings that ultimately culminate in a dream of night women who seem to be crowding her space in Rosa's guest-room, waving their breasts at her, and the woman in yellow compulsively stretching out toward her an arm holding three eggs. The images are so potent
and so strong that they come back to haunt her even in the well loved and familiar surroundings of New York City.

The night women were not merely against her (and her alone - not him), not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folded stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement with each other about her, and were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits. (264)

Jadine is most hurt and taken aback by seeing her mother and Ondine among these women. She feels betrayed by them because they too appear to have become part of the night women who are emphatically thrusting their ethnicity upon her, holding up for emulation a way of life she has chosen not to follow, and making her feel inadequate by flaunting their superior breasts which seem to be showing off their capability of nurturing whole civilisations - unlike her own which are mere ornaments for the beautification of her body. She makes a clear distinction between her New York friends who do not appear as night women, and these other traditional women who do. She feels threatened by them because they represent years of African civilisation, uphold all the values of a bygone era, and seem to be chiding her for having shied away from
the culture that is truly hers. Rather than recognising them as her foremothers who should be emulated and respected, Jadine regards them as unnecessary, ominous presences who threaten her identity, and are capable of snatching away the success she has worked so hard to achieve and the identity she has taken pains to create for herself.

When Son finally returns to New York to be with her, she fights him as an exercise in fighting the night women, the feelings that being in Eloe has aroused in her, and the combined threat of both to her own identity. Suddenly the chasm between them seems wide and unbridgeable. Each has seen clearly the life that the other lives and loves, and neither approves or appreciates the lifestyle of the other - with the result that this time their spell in New York is very different from the first. They realise that the difference between their two worlds is vast, and Jadine points this fact out to Son during one of their arguments.

"The truth is that while you were playing the piano in the Night Moves Café, I was in school... while you were driving your car into your wife's bed I was being educated...I was working, I was making something out of my life. I was learning how to make it in this world. The one we live in, not the one in your head. Not that dump Eloe;
While Son was busy going through the rigours of being an underprivileged minority in affluent America, Jadine was busy taking advantage of the best opportunities the West and Europe had to offer. She tells Son that her education and training were preparing her for life in the competitive, modern world. That this world is different from Son's world implies that it is the white world she is talking about - in practical terms, the world where blacks have to essentially live and succeed. By implication, therefore, Son's world, characterised only by blacks who live there in exclusion, becomes an unreal world for Jadine - without competition, without compensation, without conflict. Son, however, trivialises her education and achievements by telling her that her experiences so far have taught her nothing about her own kind of people, and is therefore both incomplete and impractical.

"What did they teach you about me? What tests did they give? Did they tell you what I was like. did they tell you what was on my mind? Did they describe me to you? Did they tell you what was in my heart? If they didn't teach you that, then they didn't teach you nothing, because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything,
anything at all about your children and anything
at all about your mama and your papa. You find
out about me you educated nitwit!" (267)

More striking than Son’s criticism of Jadine’s schooling, is
Morrison’s criticism of American and European education systems
that are predominantly white or majority oriented, and teach little
about minorities or other sub-cultures. It would be worthwhile to
mention here her criticism of the primary school system as well
through her use and manipulation of the primer text as a frame
against which The Bluest Eye is set. Just as Jane’s house and
family, so attractively described in the primer, are far removed from
Pecola’s world, so Jadine’s education means nothing to Son because
it does not include him - i.e. it says nothing about the average black
American and his history, sociology or psychology. Son’s words
indicate that as a race, African Americans have been excluded from
the system of instruction designed for mainstream America. Their
contributions to the larger culture have been denied the importance
and recognition they rightly deserve. Privileged African Americans
like Jadine should, therefore, try to look critically at the system
instead of following it blindly and allowing it to rule and influence
their whole life.

These are, however, non-issues for Jadine whose ultimate
aim is to “make it” (emphasis added) in a big city like New York or
Paris or some other exotic place, whereas Son wants to “be (emphasis added) it” (268). Without really knowing it, she wants to fit into a certain pre-set mould of success and fame while he wants to be something different from mainstream America. The values that matter to him are those that involve his culture, treat his race as special and important to America, and acknowledge the contributions of his people to the nation. Each feels that the other is wrong, and so Jadine tries to bring him around to her point of view, while he tries to show her the defects in the system and style she has so unquestioningly adopted.

Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell - its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (272).

Both Jadine and Son think that the other is living in some kind of a hell of his/her own making, and each tries to pull the other out of it. Each feels that the world of the other is unreal, impractical, and nonsensical. Jadine wants him to cross over into her world while he wants her to go back to her roots, to learn her culture through him,
to be the kind of woman the women of Eloe are. Morrison points out that Son has a past in the form of Eloe and its people, i.e. he has the richness of his ethnic heritage. Jadine has a future, i.e., she can still learn about her culture and roots, and choose the options that she has neglected before - options that will make her the kind of woman who draws strength from her culture and roots, and at the same time lends sustenance to them. For Jadine, Son is "mama-spoiled" because he has been pampered and entranced by the spirits of the women of Eloe - his mother, Aunt Rosa, and even Cheyenne, and since all these women represent the richness of African culture, she finds him living completely under its shadow. For him, on the other hand, Jadine's submersion into white Euro-American lifestyles is repulsive and unacceptable. He cannot come to terms with the fact that she has become a total stranger to her own culture and is, in essence, carrying the burden of white, elitist culture on her delicate shoulders. He wants to pull her out of this superficial mess, and initiate her into the real world as he knows it - a world where men and women revere the race that bore them, and work together to save it from extinction or utter submission to the majority culture. Rubenstein suggests that Son and Jadine's failed attempt at a union symbolises "a kind of radical division between...urbanity, material well-being, rationality, and privilege
on the one hand and emotional intensity, provincial values, and spiritual well-being on the other.” In this context, she sees Morrison as examining “the gap between outsiders and insiders, education and cultural rootedness, and competing definitions of authenticity within black experience.” Though Rubenstein goes on to say that a union between such diametrically opposed world views can come about only in myth or legend, there is scope for disagreement here. The very fact that Jadine and Son grow so close to each other in spite of their differences, and manage to have a fruitful, nurturing relationship for a while, implies that alliances between different classes, cultures and races have the potential to be supportive and positive as well - if they are handled the right way, with the right kind of understanding for the feelings and sensitivities of others. If they are mishandled, on the other hand, they will lead to pain, antagonism, separation. It is sad that most multiracial cultures end up this way, when the potential for progress and happiness through better understanding is always there but remains unexploited - as in the unfortunate case of the characters of *Tar Baby*.

A major fight erupts between Jadine and Son because she wants to send him to college with dividends earned on Valerian’s

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6 Rubenstein, Gates and Appiah 153.
money. Son, however, refuses firmly, and rejects contemptuously Jadine's voluble praise of Valerian as her own educator and well-wisher. Not impressed by the fact that Valerian financed Jadine's education, he exposes the act for what it really is when he tells Jadine, "That was toilet paper, Jadine. He should have wiped his ass after he shit all over your uncle and aunt. He was required to; he still is. His debt is big, woman. He can't never pay it off!" (266).

The difference between Jadine and Son's point of view is that the former thinks that Valerian went out of his way to help her when he was not required to, but Son feels that that was the least he could have done - considering the fact that her aunt and uncle practically worked their life off for him. Son violently tells Jadine the fabled Tar Baby story - implying that Valerian is the white farmer who has trapped the rabbit (Jadine) by creating the tar baby of wealth. Several critics have even contended that both Jadine and Son act as tar babies for each other - luring and catching the other by turns, and making escape difficult. For Morrison personally, however, the meaning of tar baby is entirely different. In an interview with Thomas LeClair, she refers to a "tar lady" who was often present in

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7 Keith Byerman, *Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1985) 209. Byerman writes, "Jade and Son serve as tarbabies for each other. Their contact with each other and the attachment of each to what the other represents denies them the freedom to pursue the goal which is truest for each of them."
African mythology, to a tar pit which was once considered a holy place, and the importance of tar which held things together - like Moses's boat and the pyramids. In this interview, Morrison says "for me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together..."^ The novel implies, therefore, that Jadine lacks the tar-like qualities that women like Ondine, the woman in yellow, and the women of Eloe possess. They have the consistency to hold their families and cultures together in the face of such difficult odds as the onslaught of Western white culture and its detrimental effects on all that is dear and sacred to them. These women know and appreciate what Morrison refers to in the book's dedication as "their true and ancient properties."^ The term "ancient properties" here refers to the African heritage that the women cherish, and

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^ Morrison's dedication reads

For

Mrs. Caroline Smith
Mrs. Millie McTyree
Mrs. Ardelia Willis
Mrs. Ramah Wofford
Mrs. Lois Brooks
-and each of their sisters,
-all of whom knew
-their true and ancient
-properties.

The women named here include Morrison's Grandmother, Mother, Aunts and sister. In the last part of her essay "The Fabulous World of Tomi Morrison: Tar Baby," Eleanor W. Traylor writes that these women "are representative of a culture, of a time, of a magnificence perpetually present in human history...these women acknowledge women of other cultures whose paradigms they either approve or reject." Critical Essays on Tomi Morrison, comp. Nellie Y. McKay (Boston. G. K. Hall & Co., 1988) 149
would go to any extent to protect. It denotes the pride they feel in their particular culture, and lends a new richness and authenticity to their existence. These are the qualities that Son looks for in Jadine but cannot find. Even before he knew her well - during their initial meeting at L'Arbe de la Croix - he had tried to “breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency...” (120), but the tug-of-war is always there because he is afraid that if he moves too close to her, she would “press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-coloured silk into him” (120). Even though he is attracted to and fascinated by her, he is afraid that instead of adopting the way of life presented by him, she will try to mould him according to her preferences. During the course of their romance over the next few months, this becomes only too clear. Jadine demonstrates no pride in being an American of African origin, shows no awareness of ethnic African culture, and makes no attempt to understand her own people or the land they come from. Just as Son shows disgust and contempt for all that is important to Jadine, so she retaliates by calling Eloe a “medieval slave basket” (274), and its inhabitants, “a pack of Neanderthals...” (259) with whom she can never identify. After much unpleasantness, and physical and verbal abuse, Son stomps out of the apartment - and returns repentant the next day - only to find her gone.
Feeling orphaned and insecure again, Jadine, meanwhile, has decided to go back to Paris - to the white world that she knows, understands and appreciates. It is also a world about which she has no illusions, and is aware of the reality of blacks who move around in it. It is this knowledge and awareness that she is confident about using for getting ahead in life. She knows what she wants, and decides to go after it.

With white people the rules were even simpler.
She needed only to be stunning, and to convince them she was not as smart as they were. Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it....

(127)
In spite of Morrison's sarcastic description of it, this is the world that Jadine understands, comprehends, knows how to behave in, and decides to return to. Here the people talk in a language she can understand. That she only has to look stunning on the outside to impress whites indicates Morrison's contempt for the world that appreciates only superficial beauty - as opposed to the one that looks for the sustaining qualities that form part of a person's character. It is unfortunate that Jadine's inclusion into and understanding of one world (white) automatically excludes her from
the other (black). Part of her problem is her inability to bring about a balance between the world as she knows it - a world of plenty inhabited by educated, materially successful, rich people, and the world as she ought to know it - the world that emphasises responsibility toward the culture and the community, that views success not in terms of individual achievement but rather by the amount and quality of support a person provides to his family and community.

For a person used to measuring love, affection and caring by the number and quality of Christmas presents that she gives and receives, this is an incomprehensible thought. This difference is widely felt on her second visit to L'Arbe de la Croix, just before her flight to Paris. It is not just the Street household that has changed. She finds that her aunt and uncle's attitude toward her has altered considerably as well. Instead of the congenial couple who had welcomed her with open arms only months ago - ready to indulge her in every possible way, she finds an old man and woman who look at her with both reproach and expectation in their eyes. Their world has crumpled around them since the unfortunate Christmas dinner, and they are unsure about their position in the Street household now. Ondine also does some plain speaking which puts Jadine in a peculiar dilemma because she is not ready to lend the
kind of emotional support her aunt and uncle are looking for.

"Jadine, a girl has got to be a daughter first....And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a real woman....I thought I was doing right by sending you to all them schools and so I never told you it and I should have. You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel...a certain careful way about people older than you are....A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her....What I want from you is what I want for you. I don't want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours." (283)

These words show a change in the relationship between aunt and niece, and another turning point in the formation of Jadine's peculiar sensibility. She feels guilty because she senses that her aunt and uncle, who have done so much for her, are asking her for some emotional support - now that their world has been somewhat disrupted. She, however, feels incapable of looking after their needs - of being a "parent" to them. By refusing to "parent" them, she has, in essence, shown that she is not a good daughter. Ondine
attributes this failure to her education at expensive, exclusively white schools (and ruefully admits her own consent and encouragement of it) that have made her materialistic and success-oriented. Had she kept in touch with her "true and ancient properties" she would have given preference to the well-being of her aunt and uncle - rather than this single-minded pursuit of her own goals. The most she can offer Sydney and Ondine by way of help is to ask them if they would like to travel to Paris, and live there with her. It would be worthwhile to note here that Jadine could never become a true "daughter," but Son always remains a dutiful son - both to his family and to the community. This is best demonstrated by two examples: first, even when he was in deep trouble, he used to send money to his father in Eloé, and second, he rescued a strange girl from the streets of New York City when she was distraught after a fight with her boyfriend. These examples show that Son puts other people first, and possesses the nurturing qualities of a "daughter" that Jadine lacks.

Once Jadine boards the plane for Paris, she cuts herself off from her African connections for good. She makes a conscious decision to choose white over black - worlds that have, unfortunately, become mutually exclusive of each other. Commenting on the intricacies of the portrayal of Jadine's
character. Barbara Christian writes, “Jadine...is portrayed as the woman who has taken a position so far removed from her community that she becomes a part of the West. In her search for self, she becomes selfish; in her desire for power, she loses essential parts of herself...destroys any relationship to community in herself.”

Jadine had always felt that any identification with or emulation of her ancestral roots would somehow threaten the identity she has created for herself - would drag her away from the cosy niche of comfort and luxury that she has built around herself, and so she stays away from her “true and ancient properties.” Morrison suggests that from the point of view of the community, these concerns are petty and selfish. They indicate that the individual is merely going in pursuit of private gains to the exclusion of public or communal good. Jadine has, however, seen her life as it can be - if it is lived with Son by her side on one hand, and according to the dictates of her own individual consciousness on the other. The former lifestyle would make her feel secure, protected, loved. The latter would make her feel orphaned again, and yet this is the way of life she chooses. On the aeroplane she thinks retrospectively back to the last few months, and concludes

that “a grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She was the safety she longed for” (292). Through these words, Morrison indicates that Jadine has finally justified her choice. That she herself is the safety she longs for implies that a woman, as an individual, is an end in herself. Whatever she desires comes from within her self. She does not have to turn to outside forces like the community or the original culture to find what she is looking for. Jadine makes this difficult choice based on her ambitions rather than her heritage. For her, as a distinct human being, this determination to succeed alone, unattached, is a triumph because she chooses to be herself - a complete person who does not need the support of race or nationality to define herself as an individual. It was a wish she had expressed at the beginning of the book: “sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside - not American - not black - just me” (45). Even though this thought had come to Jadine much earlier, it is only now that she realises what it means to only be “the person inside” - raceless, colourless, nationalityless - just an individual in pursuit of a goal. As a member of a larger community, however, her decision brands her a complete failure. She is an incomplete person because she is not held together by old roots, and does not have the support of the community to complete the circle of her life. For Jadine this is the
final revelation. She has gained a certain self knowledge, made a concrete decision to stick to the options she had previously chosen, and paid the price of pain and separation. Her boarding the Plane suggests that she has decided to take up her life exactly where she had left off - forgetting or neglecting the brief interlude at L'Arbe de la Croix - but not able to remain unaffected by it. She had come to the Caribbean to think things over, and gets more food for thought than she had bargained for. She chooses the options that take her away from her aunt and uncle, from Son, from her ancestral roots. She chooses the options that Valerian's support has readied her for - life in the contemporary white world - over the options placed before her by Sydney, Ondine, Son.

In conclusion, it would be worthwhile to mention that Tar Baby is not just a failed love story - the unsuccessful saga of a promising romance gone wrong. It is, at bottom, the sad and unfortunate tale of two great cultures - African and American - so intricately bound together, yet unable to sustain a separate but integrated identity. Christian views Tar Baby as a most pessimistic novel because she finds that "Morrison sees no practical way out of the morass of sexism, racism, and class privilege in the Western world, as it is presently constructed, for anyone, black or white,
female or male." Though it would be unfair to attribute such concrete cynicism to one of Morrison's finer works, there is no doubt that the novel does paint a rather grim picture about race and class relations not only in the United States but also in other countries - represented by the Caribbean - where populations are both class-based and mixed, and consist of majorities and minorities. Over and above these class wars and class crimes, however, Morrison's work depicts the dilemma of the contemporary African American woman as she stands today. It also shows, by extension, the dilemma of thousands of young women belonging to mixed cultures and societies: women who want to make something of their lives, who wish to succeed in the face of great odds, and who come up with criticism from their own communities for not conforming to certain pre-set values. Though Jadine starts out as a particularised individual, her character takes on a certain universality once she begins the tug-of-war between her 'biological' and 'adopted' culture. Her choices, and the self-revelation that follows them, make her tragic in nature. She is fully aware of the connotations of her choices, and knows what she is losing because of them, but her pursuit of her goal, and her decision to stick to the life for which she is trained makes her somehow noble. Her *hamartia* is her inability

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to take advantage of the fact that she is both African and American, to make the best of both worlds, and to bring about the right balance between her two life-styles. The significance of Tar Baby lies in the fact that Morrison depicts the formation of Jadine's race and class consciousness through the vehicle of black culture. White society plays only a peripheral role in that it provides multifarious opportunities for Jadine, and presents her with an ideal of success. But it is the black community which, by its very condemnation of her life-style, initiates the confusions within her, and compels her to choose one option over the other. Though Tar Baby may be read by some as a novel of disillusion and despondency, it's greatest hope lies in the fact that it shows that an individual poised on the crossroads of life and culture does, occasionally, have the potential to make the right choice. If she chooses wrongly, however, there is always a chance that she will, as the Bible aptly reveals, and Jadine exemplifies, gain the whole world and lose her own soul.