Chapter I

Traditional Storytelling as Narrative Technique

I will tell you something about stories,
[...]
They aren't just for entertainment.
Don't be fooled
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off illness and death.
You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.

Leslie Marmon Silko

So I told stories
As my racial responsibility
To instil in the young
The art of perpetuating
Existential history and essential tradition
To be passed on to the next generation.

Temsula Ao

The fiction of Toni Morrison is imbued with African-American folkloristic oral traditions through which she seeks to affirm black identity. This chapter explores Morrison’s role as a storyteller who uses African modes of storytelling and orature as narrative technique to create what Gay Wilentz has termed, “oraliterature.”¹ Her folk aesthetic is grounded in the cultural resources of her people and her fiction relies on “folk processes of communication”² which give authenticity to her depiction of the black community. Storytelling is the primary folk process in Morrison’s fictional world where her own personal self-discovery comes through her writing. This mode of storytelling is purely African
and therefore, an examination of Morrison’s narrative style as containing key elements of African modes of storytelling becomes imperative.

In exploring the various modes of linguistic expression in songs, religious sermons, stories and folk sayings, we find the primacy of the oral tradition as the foundation of African-American cultural expression. Morrison’s narrative strategy aims to encapsulate the orality of the spoken word and to present the workings of this oral tradition in her fiction. Although several critics have commented extensively on the complicated narrative structure of her novels, only a few have given attention to the influence of African and African-American oral storytelling traditions Morrison employs. Harding and Martin do acknowledge the importance of the black oral tradition in Morrison for the correct reception of her work. However, they feel that it is insufficient for expressing the complexity of Morrison’s fiction and that examining her novels “for traces of traditional forms of storytelling” would be disappointing. Contradicting this view, this analysis holds that Morrison’s role, as a black woman storyteller is unassailable: the oral traditions of the black community and the orature of her ancestors is evident both in the language and storytelling methods of all her works.

As mentioned in the Introduction, Morrison herself has detailed the principles of African-American oral tradition which have a bearing on her
folk aesthetics and determine both the content and form of her texts.\textsuperscript{5}
Thus new meanings are created through improvisation by the teller of the tale, and his/her relationship with the listeners of the tale through antiphonal or call and response mechanisms. Consequently, too, the significance of audience participation in ensuring the functionality and meaningfulness of the tale becomes clear. Hence, in Morrison’s texts, the emphasis lies not only in the content of the tale, but also, in how the storyteller involves her audience. This chapter therefore focuses on Morrison’s narrative strategies as an area that has important implications for the study of ethnic fiction with its roots in folklore and storytelling traditions.

By incorporating cultural and folkloristic elements into the structure of her novels, Morrison uses the oral techniques and devices of the African storyteller, or ‘griot’. Although it is difficult to find those elements that set folktales apart from written literature, still, there are certain internal stylistic qualities that are found even in the transcribed form of oral literature. Some of these stylistic elements, which contribute to the spoken quality of these tales, are repetition, parallelism, and digression. Variations of these elements form Morrison’s own narrative strategy. Some of the other oral narrative techniques that she introduces in her writing are reiteration and circularity, a shifting narrative voice,
interactive participatory mechanisms, and an episodic fragmentary re-
telling of the past. "Plot-construction" as such, in Morrison's novels
culminates or evolves through a process of compilation of multiple points
of view and varieties of interpretations of events. Thus, rather than
relating the story in chronological sequence, Morrison uses a highly
complex and non-linear form.

Examples of the characteristics noted above are evident in many
oral stories or folktales such as the trickster tale, the tall tale, orphan tale,
cycle tale and the dilemma tale, to name a few. Folktales and their
manner of telling have been instrumental in shaping the African-
American literary tradition. Morrison herself makes many structural uses
of them in her work, such as the Dick-and-Jane tale, the flying African
and tar baby tales. However, this is not to say that she simply repeats and
employs black oral forms for their own sake. Traditionally, although
these folktales are the common property of the community as well as the
product of a joint and communal authorship, they are not static and
unchanging. Oratures, like the cultures that produce them, constantly
evolve and change with time for various reasons. Thus the tales are
modified, altered and enriched, as they are transmitted from
one person to another, to such an extent that new types, new
combinations are adopted and true development take place.6
Likewise, Morrison re-creates and re-employs these tales to suit her own artistic purpose and vision. The value she places on improvisation demands the constant creation and adaptation of new meanings to fit changing needs and social conditions. Like the African griot who alternates between set ‘texts’ and improvisation, investing a tale with his own observation or supplementing it with his own vital experience, so also Morrison invests much of herself in re-creating these stories, while keeping to the framework of poetic tradition.

For the purpose of this study, the dilemma tale and the trickster tale provide the best contexts within which to analyze Morrison’s narrative technique and to reveal how these “folk processes of communication” can provide new or alternative insight into the reading of her novels. Since Morrison is also concerned in moving “African-Americans from the periphery, as dismissive others, to a centre where their experiences can be articulated and elaborated,”7 her adoption of narrative techniques that enable her to challenge hegemonic discourse and to contest the misrepresentation and distortion of the history and experiences of her people become important. Hence, this argument: that an analysis of Morrison’s folk modes of narration within the thematic, structural, and critical frameworks of the dilemma and trickster tales would provide a potential interpretive site for reading her works.
The Dilemma Tale: Interrogative and Interpretive sites

Traditional dilemma tales serve the purpose of resolving problematic issues through collective observation, reasoning, and critical evaluation. They are distinguished by episodic structures, irresoluble conflicts confronting the main character (s), and finally, by the narrative’s refusal to resolve the dilemma, leaving the conclusion indeterminate and interrogative.

According to Opoku-Agyemang and Rogers Asempasah, there are two structural levels of narration in the dilemma tale. The first level deals with the tale or adventure proper, which may raise complex ethical, legal and moral issues about the protagonist’s actions and choices. These tales are open in that they end with a dilemma posed as a question, which the listeners/readers are to debate and resolve. Some tales may have a particular correct answer; some are mathematical, while others are ethical or moral in nature. This implies that the listeners have a choice. The purpose is to prompt audience participation, to promote discussion and to develop debating skills.

Through dilemma tales, therefore, the community is presented with moral dilemmas, which they are obliged to resolve. At its core, a dilemma tale is structured to prompt audiences to participate individually, to express a stake in its outcome, engage in debate and logical reasoning,
construct arguments and judgments, and in the process acquire group identity. The design of such tales is to speak directly to the community and to prompt a direct response from it. In the work of shaping the outcome anew on each occasion of a story’s telling, the audience acquires a particular group identity through its collective emotional and intellectual labour.

The second structural level is thus instigated by the question posed by the narrator, which is deployed to resolve problematic issues through collective debate, reasoning and critical judgment. The focus is now on the participants who are invited to discuss and debate the issue or issues involved. Since it involves the participation of every listening member of the community, this implies the incorporation of multiple voices and perspectives, the outcome of which is usually divergent. This only demonstrates that often there are no unconditional or totalizing narratives and answers, and that meaning-making is a communal process that involves not only the teller but also demands the active participation of the listener/reader.

The next section examines how Morrison deploys the characteristics of the dilemma tale as narrative technique and at the same time integrates the constituents of the oral vernacular tradition such as call and response, naming, witnessing and testifying, and signifying as
storytelling devices. Although all her novels provide potential interpretative sites for reading them as dilemma tales, only those novels, such as *The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, Beloved, and Paradise*, which particularly illustrate the structure, purpose, and thematic preoccupation of the dilemma type tale are examined. A comparative study of Morrison’s first novel *The Bluest Eye* and her fifth, *Beloved*, will show her continued use of the elements of the dilemma type tale and how she develops it as a unique art form. *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* as dilemma tales differ in their emphases and articulations and therefore require separate considerations.

*The Bluest Eye and Beloved*

Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, at the height of the “Black is Beautiful” era when black activists were advocating African-American cultural values. Yet, the doctrine of Black Power, which largely relied on a male-centred ideology, had little relevance for most black women like Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*, was therefore, written with full reflection of black women’s reality, particularly, the reality of being ‘a little black girl’ in white America. Morrison’s cultural politics of narrative therefore, proposes a rewriting of black experience that can truly represent African-Americans, particularly women, whose “specific local bodies, histories, and cultural productions have been eradicated by commodity culture.”

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Morrison’s concern in *The Bluest Eye* thus constitutes her struggle with colonization for her characters and the black community, as well as in her own writing. In treating the theme of colonization of black female beauty by white ideals of beauty, Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* exposes how the consumer culture and white standards of beauty turn self-esteem in the black community into self-loathing. In scrutinizing the enthrallment of black Americans by the white way of life, Morrison focuses on how young black girls are particularly vulnerable to the myth of white cultural concepts of beauty resulting in racial self-hatred. This is revealed in her characterization of Pecola Breedlove who unquestioningly accepts that she is ugly because she does not have white features, and who therefore, yearns for the ‘bluest’ of eyes as a way of attaining beauty and love.

The one controlling thought that runs throughout the novel is that black is ugly and white beautiful. A cultural shift takes place that is prejudicial to the character’s own history, culture, and experience. Morrison attempts to break the stranglehold of white culture and way of life. Consequently, *The Bluest Eye* also becomes the story of African-American folk culture in process. Morrison succeeds in making it so through her use of oral storytelling techniques developed on an elaborate structure and narrative design based on the dilemma tale form. This is in keeping with her concern with reclaiming the oral tradition as a form of
cultural intervention and with using the novel to alter perspective and transform consciousness. As such, a discussion of *The Bluest Eye* based on the structural and thematic preoccupations of the dilemma tale will reveal how Morrison questions the imposed values and perceptions of the dominant culture and attempts to offer alternative cultural knowledge and beliefs based on black Americans’ African traditions and heritage.

With a special emphasis on call and response patterns to establish a dialogic relation between the author, character and the audience, Morrison shows the importance of incorporating this principle of ‘Black art’ in foregrounding the problematic of authorial intent and interpretation. For example, Claudia, right from the start, establishes herself as the narrator for Morrison’s folktale. In fact, like the traditional teller of the dilemma tale, Claudia consciously directs her narrative towards a responsive and appreciative audience. The opening lines of her narrative are important in this regard as the sentence, “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941,” (*BE*, p.3) creates a sense of intimacy between the reader and the story. With these lines, Morrison’s child narrator invites the reader into a troubling community secret: the incestuous rape of her 11-year-old friend Pecola. The author’s intention at this level, is to raise complex ethical and moral issues about “the secret” that is “being shared” and upon which, the listeners/readers are to
contemplate. Thus, Morrison calls on the readers to concentrate on the question Claudia wants answered—"why?" But, as Claudia says, "since why is difficult to handle," the novel will attempt to analyze "how."

Valerie Smith complains that The Bluest Eye does not "address hard questions directly": it does not undertake to explain, for example, why black Americans aspire to unattainable standards of beauty. Further, she opines that it is not only Claudia "but the novel itself that avoids 'why' and takes refuge in 'how.'" However, this is exactly the point of the dilemma tale: to interrogate a human dilemma or conflicting moral issues and not simply to explain what they mean. In the dilemma type tale, the narrator of the tale first relates the important episodes of the protagonist's adventure to a listening audience but ends the tale with a question. This is not the ending, but the beginning of the next phase of the tale—the debate or discussion that the audience engages in to resolve the puzzle, or enigma, or dilemma in question. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison deviates slightly from the traditional structural order by beginning her tale with the question usually posed at the end of the tale. Thus, the reader knows the story of Pecola's tragedy from the beginning and there is no element of surprise. Thereafter, she organizes her story around the central event of the shocking and appalling act of a father who impregnates his own daughter. What Morrison wants the reader is to acknowledge this
dreadful deed and respond to its terrible consequences. By examining Pecola's life and the role that social constructions played in her tragedy—a tragedy in which, "the reader, as part of the population of the text, is implicated" (BE, Afterword, p.171), the reader is led to contemplate philosophical, moral and ethical aspects of the story and to participate fully in examining the painful circumstances of her characters' lives.

In fact, much of the dialogue in the novel occurs in the shape of questions, through which Morrison achieves reader involvement, by not supplying answers. The reader does. More than this, the reader also has to sort through the families, situations, plot segments, and meanings to create a "story." By sifting through the continuous shifting points of view, the reader can re-establish the logical sequence of events and thus, better comprehend the action. The series of problems and questions that are posed in the course of the story inaugurates the beginning of a discussion in which the audience must give its own conclusion. Hence, readers must work to follow the structural disjunctions and interpret for themselves character and incident. Morrison achieves this goal by following the call and response pattern of African-American oral tradition. This also relates to an important characteristic of the form of the dilemma tale that demands the active involvement of the audience in
contemplating conflicting issues, of choosing where to lay the blame, and of finding a just response to a difficult situation.

What follows then, is the deconstruction of the tale in order to construct meaning as interrogation in *The Bluest Eye* begins with the reconstruction of the events that allowed such a despicable act as Pecola’s rape to take place. In the traditional setting of the dilemma tale, this constitutes the second level of narration. Thus brought into focus is the dilemma tale as an interrogative and interpretive site as readers try to understand the many-sided issues that surround this act before making a judgment. A narrative situation arises wherein the voices of “the extended narrators or direct participants, the listeners and the community,”¹³ enter to reconstitute the experiences and subjectivities of the characters. This involves the employment of the technique of multiple points of view, a technique which Morrison makes extensive use of in all her novels.

The narrative context for the representation of multiple points of view and voices comes from several sources. The narration consists of narrative commentary from Claudia, and her reflections on the story as an adult, omniscient narration by Morrison herself, and some first person “oral” narration from Pecola’s mother. In between these narrations are fragments of dialogue representing different sections of the community such as, the three whores, Geraldine, Junior, Soaphead Church, and
unidentified community gossips. There are also passages shifting between the third person omniscient and first person stream of consciousness narrator. Each of these narratives becomes a tale-within-a-tale, as it were, another characteristic of oral storytelling. Through this simultaneous release of voices, Morrison attempts to create multiple perspectives that reveal the complexity of interpretation characteristic of the dilemma type tale. The result is a layering of many narrative voices that allow for the representation of various forms of oral narration such as women's gossip, Signifying, free indirect discourse, call-and-response, testifying, and other examples of traditionally black rhetorical rituals and modes of storytelling.

The multiple perspectives reveal how most of the characters suffer different degrees of victimization at the hands of a society that confuses whiteness with virtue, including Pecola's parents. Morrison takes great pains to chart the legacy of shame, oppression, and anger that is experienced by Cholly and Pauline throughout most of their lives. By doing so, she highlights the historical and social circumstances that have led African-Americans to make difficult choices between negative alternatives, and the complex events that culminate in Cholly's dreadful act. On the structural level, the novel is framed with a deconstructive dialogue with the Dick and Jane children's books that mirror the white
family's affluence, morality, and Americanness and emphasizes its ironic discrepancy and contradiction in the light of the Breedloves' story of racial persecution. The headings, consisting of the primer text, which precede the chapters focus on each member of the Breedlove family. Hence, the title lines and chapters complement each other like the elements of call and response. Morrison shows how national narratives of the white middle-class make incomprehensible how unjust histories can shape a black family's struggling present. The narrative about the Breedlove family would never fit into the simplified space of a Dick and Jane primer. By focusing on such a narrative, Morrison adds this concomitant of the dilemma tale, thus presenting a new way of conceiving and perceiving history, and challenges master discourse.

The section entitled "SEEFATHER," articulates how Cholly Breedlove has learned that his blackness is a sign of absence and exclusion. Abandoned by his father and left on a garbage heap by his mother, he embodies in many ways, the legacy of abandonment within the African-American family. The overwhelming influence of white society has long divested him of his authority as family provider and protector, and he recognizes his own failures in Pecola's unhappiness. Cholly thus considers the choiceless choices before him, and voices the problematic of choice that the novel explores:
Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child-unburdened—why wasn’t she happy?... What could he do for her—ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned—out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven—year—old daughter? ...How dare she love him? Hadn’t she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? (BE, p.127)\textsuperscript{14}

The most obvious feature here is narrative repetition in the form of rhetorical questions asked in Cholly’s voice. The narrative voice repeatedly shifts back and forth, from the omniscient author’s objective view to Cholly’s subjective perspective to cause a fusion of the voices of the narrator and the “silent but speaking character.”\textsuperscript{15} Morrison is thus able to portray the divided nature of Cholly’s mind. The readers become privy to Cholly’s painful awareness of his own failures, and self-hatred, and how powerless to empower, he resorts to drunkenness, and eventually to rape. This also can be seen as a demented effort to convince Pecola that she is lovable. Like the listeners of the dilemma tale, readers therefore ponder over the ethical or moral issues involved, and discover that while Cholly’s crime can never be condoned, the act alone does not tell the full story.

Similarly, Morrison provides the “SEEMOTHER” section to describe Pauline’s life, thoughts and feelings through an ‘oral history’, which, is two voiced and invites the reader to interpret their significance. Barbara Christian observes that it is important that “we hear Pauline’s
story in her own sound patterns and images, for her way of perceiving the world, primarily in rural tones and images of colour, is a key to wasted life.” Unfortunately, Pauline’s sense of irony and humour, the folk knowledge and value system of the rural South, which privileged community over individual wealth and consumerism, are never transmitted to Pecola. Having internalized white norms of beauty, Pauline cuts Pecola off from a nurturing mother-child relationship — a crucial factor in black women’s self-definition. Her narrative thereafter, reveals her movement towards the white bourgeois values represented by the films she watches to relieve her loneliness. Hence, her distorted sense of motherhood leads her to beat, rather than comfort or sustain her abused daughter.

_The Bluest Eye_ abounds with characters whose blackness diminishes their humanity. Most disturbing are the light-skinned blacks who distance themselves from their black heritage in an exercise of same-race hatred. Thus, Geraldine, an upper class light-skinned, educated, and wealthy woman, literally attempts to scrub the blackness from her life and that of her son. She demonstrates how an African-American can totally assimilate assumptions of white cultural superiority, and willingly discriminate against anyone who threatens her progress towards this middle-class position. When her son, Junior brings Pecola into their
home, Geraldine’s reaction is one of blatant anger. At this point, the reader is left to interpret the reasons for her loss of composure here.

By juxtaposing the Breedloves with the Dick and Jane primer, Morrison not only critiques their contents, but also the school systems and families that cooperate to perpetuate racial hierarchies. In Pecola’s school, schoolteachers favour Maureen Peal, “a high-yellow dream child” on whom they smile encouragingly, making Claudia and her sister feel inadequate. And Pecola, ignored and despised by her teachers and classmates alike, is the recipient of Maureen’s ultimate insult: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos.” (BE, p.56). When Claudia anxiously questions, “What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it so important? And so what?” (BE, p.57), Morrison directs them to the reader of her dilemma tale, inviting them to consider the particular predicament of black girls in a nation that equates beauty and power with whiteness.

The ultimate manifestation of self-hatred and same-race hatred is Soaphead Church, a “cinnamon-eyed West Indian” whose relatives consistently “married ‘up’” to lighten their family, and who was taught to separate himself in body, mind and spirit from all that suggested Africa. Likewise, Morrison also provides opportunities for the reader to hear snippets of conversations that give glimpses of those members of society
who live on its fringes, namely, the three “magnificent” whores, in whose company Pecola finds temporary contentment and respite. However, despite their kindness to Pecola, the three whores like other members of the society, do not assume responsibility for her life.

In the same way, the aftermath of Pecola’s pregnancy also reveals the cruelty and irresponsibility of the black community. In *The Bluest Eye*, the feminine subtext of the community women—advising, instructing, commenting, gossiping forms the textural background of the novel. Although Morrison does not directly reveal the perspectives of the community members regarding Pecola’s tragedy, the reader deduces this through storytelling devices that she employs, such as backyard conversations, gossip and information exchange sessions that take place on porches, in the backyard, in living rooms or kitchens. In this respect too, the opening sentence “Quiet as its kept” grounds the act of storytelling in a world of gossip, of talk between women, of secrets shared. The reader deduces that the community feels no compassion for Pecola and offers her no help. Instead, she is the subject of titillating gossip among the adults (which is how Claudia and Frieda glean information about Pecola’s predicament). The language of these conversations is revealing; the girls observe that there is no real sorrow for Pecola:
They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, “Poor little girl,” or, “Poor baby,” but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils. (BE, p.149)

Morrison suggests that the failure of the whole community to understand Pecola’s victimization is the outcome of their earlier treatment towards other members of their community, such as Aunt Julia, whose eccentricity made her the butt of their jokes. As Jane Kuenz says, “their inability or refusal to make sense of her actions...suggests that the town has an undiagnosed and unexamined history of producing women like Pecola, that her experience—and the extremity of it—is not an isolated instance.”

Since narrative is also a kind of testimony, a verbal act of telling about what has happened, Morrison situates Claudia’s narrative voice within African-American oral tradition by making her bear witness, through testifying, to Pecola’s pain and the community’s failings. Claudia ‘speaks-out’ her community’s failings. She is unsparing in placing the responsibility for Pecola’s destruction on the black community who had used Pecola to feel better about themselves. In ‘speaking-out’ thus, Claudia, once involved as a speaking subject, becomes not merely a witness to the tragedy but also a participant in the events she describes. Thus, she includes herself in her assessment of the
community’s behaviour and motives, as indicated by her references to “we” and “our” (BE, p.163).

However, Morrison also moves beyond her characters and the text itself to implicate the reader in this assessment. Keith Byerman conveys this idea succinctly:

Pecola may be the central character, but she is far from the only victim of the blue eyes. “We” individually and collectively are both victimizer and victim, and, while the roles vary with each character, it is also the case that the role of victimizer results from that character’s own victimization by a larger society.”

Through Claudia’s use of the inclusive “we,” we relive our own sense of familiar experiences. In this way, like the listeners of the dilemma tales, we become part of the unified community who must engage in debate and logical reasoning, and express an opinion. The final section of the novel thus emphasizes reader’s participation as towards the end of the story, Claudia directly addresses the reader:

And Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while. (emphasis mine, BE, p.162)

Like the protagonists of each subplot who participate in Pecola’s persecution, the readers too are called on to interrogate themselves. They are thus forced to reflect on the fact that there are always victims like Pecola in every society- those who make us feel better about ourselves- the outcasts and pariahs who live “on the edge of town” rejected and
avoided by the rest of the community. Although it may be too late for Pecola and the community that failed her, the reader wonders whether things had to turn out this way. Could Pecola’s tragedy have been averted? Was the community’s mistreatment of Pecola inevitable? Morrison does not answer these questions, but shows instead, a reflection of a world that cannot call itself right or moral.

The purpose of the dilemma tale is not merely to explain what the tale means or to assign blame, but rather to provide a contemplative space for the audience to discuss and debate, to interrogate and interpret the dilemma or moral issue. The unresolved questions that remain are to be resolved together by the community. It is the nature of the issues involved in *The Bluest Eye*, not so much the question itself, that call for different interpretations which may have moral or ethical value. In retrospect, Morrison says that she was not fully successful in leading readers to “an interrogation of themselves” in respect of Pecola’s experience, but instead allows us “the comfort of pitying her” (*BE*, Afterword, p.172). The issues that remain at the close of the novel, however, force us to focus on the choices before us. In the oral tradition, witnessing and testifying go hand in hand; one who witnesses has an obligation to testify. Claudia, in recalling her friend’s plight, is jolted into recognizing the connected underpinnings of family and community. And in listening to Claudia’s
testimony, the reader becomes both a witness (we are allowed to see and hear this testimony through the written word) and a testifier (we are called to respond). Claudia’s narrative forces us to understand why, for the sake of family and community, this story must be repeatedly told.

For Morrison, black history is the core of black identity. In *Beloved*, she attempts to reclaim this history by presenting us with the unwritten history of African-Americans. In fact, *Beloved* is indicative of a historic shift away from the usual discussion of the anti-bellum period, the Civil War, and the generational-long racial conflict. Morrison’s novel of black life does not mention these commonly known historical facts of national life. Instead, she has effectively re-shaped the storytelling of this national conflict by re-imaging the African-American community during and after slavery to retrieve the moments, which destroyed their authentic selves in order to restore them. Although the novel takes as its frame historically documented events in black lives, Morrison’s concern, however, is a corrective one: to “fill in the blanks that the traditional slave narrative left.”21 Like *The Bluest Eye* in which she attempts to rearticulate African-American history and identity by concentrating on the interior lives of her characters, in *Beloved*, she seeks to find and expose a truth about the inner realities and interpersonal relationships of people who did not get the opportunity to write it.
In order to turn the things unsaid or even unsayable into a narrated possibility, Morrison engages narrative strategies based on traditional forms of imaginative expression to give us an intimation of "unspeakable thoughts" of characters deprived of their past, and who have to face their own painful process of self-reconstruction. Throughout, the text highlights the various processes by which the characters tell or remember their stories, which both empower them as well as contest the distorted versions of hegemonic narratives. Morrison's technique in *Beloved*, developed on the narrative characteristics of the dilemma tale provides an alternative perspective within which to read her text. Although she employs multiple points of view in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison was not fully successful in making all the voices of the participants heard. Moreover, Pecola's case does not really specify the dilemma that confronts the main character in dilemma tales because of her portrayal as an innocent and convenient victim of her community's frustration, anger, ignorance, and shame. Therefore, there is no incisive definition of the problematic of choice, an essential component of such tales. In *Beloved*, Morrison deploys these features of the dilemma tale form to much greater advantage and effect.

An escaped slave mother's decision to kill her infant daughter rather than let the oppressive slave system take her back is the most
important event in *Beloved*. This chilling and horrifying act of infanticide dominates all the other events in the novel. What led to this act is not told in chronological fashion, but is narrated in a highly complex and non-linear form. The “plot” of *Beloved* may seem confusing to readers because it functions as a kind of puzzle, with bits and pieces of the story gradually unfolding as different characters remember and share their experiences. Many of these memories or “remembers” as Morrison calls them, have long been suppressed and uncovering them is a slow painful process and hence, does not always follow a linear nature. The disorientation that Morrison’s narrative causes by the sudden shifts and changes that her readers must negotiate performs a positive function. Firstly, it gives them something of the flavour of the experience of the original slaves, snatched from their homes in Africa and then transported suddenly into slavery in America.\(^22\) Secondly, it gives the narrative the appearance of being “oral, meandering, effortless, spoken,”\(^23\) an aspect of the oral style and improvisational quality that is central to African-American storytelling. Finally, in keeping with the purpose of dilemma tales, the reader is co-opted “into both the creative process and the more complex interpretive exercise”\(^24\) in the struggle to understand the *how and why* of the tale.
With this unique style, Morrison presents us with glimpses of the past which creep through the cracks in Sethe’s memory and the ‘plot’ of the novel, revealing a horrific act of violence that is paradoxically an act of love. Schoolteacher’s “project,” in which he measures Sethe’s body for anthropological reasons, and scolds his pupil for improperly categorizing her human and animal characteristics symbolizes the idea of slavery’s terrible brutality as being the death of one’s humanity. Through the chinks in Sethe’s memory, the reader learns of the appropriation of her milk—a crucial factor in determining her desperate act of violence. In her exploration of the moral ambiguity of horrific love through such scenes, Morrison breaks down the polarities of right and wrong making it extremely difficult for the reader to judge Sethe’s decision of choosing to kill her children rather than “having them die” under the inhuman slave system. Morrison has explored the same theme of violent mothers in her earlier works. In *Sula*, Eva Peace first demonstrates horrific love when she mutilates herself in order to acquire economic security for her children, and later, when she kills her junkie son Plum in a profound act of love to save him from a prolonged and emasculated suffering.

The moral question of Morrison’s fiction is one that has caused much controversy and discussion amongst critics and readers alike. How we are ultimately to judge Eva’s action—as euthanasia or murder—is the
ethical issue in question in *Sula*. In *Beloved*, the central question that the novel poses then is whether Sethe was right or wrong to do what she did. Morrison compounds the problem by stating that Sethe did what was right although she did not have the right to do it.25 By presenting this dilemma for the readers to consider, Morrison demonstrates the most defining quality of the dilemma tale in presenting a situation where the protagonist must choose between two hateful alternatives, and then, shifting the moral and ethical burden onto the reader.

To put things in perspective for the reader, Morrison presents a dialogue between a principal character like Paul D and Sethe in which she tries to explain why she killed her baby: “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and keep them from what I know is terrible. I did that” (*B*, p.165). The moral issue enters when Morrison allows Paul D to say accusingly:

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”
“TThere could have been a way. Some other way.” (*B*, p.165)

The dilemma to be debated by the audience is hence, predicated on Sethe’s agonized question, “What way?” This ends the novel’s first level of narration within the dilemma tale framework. The question, was there some other way that Sethe could have taken— invites the audience to look at the cold reality of the situation and judge for themselves. In doing
so, the reader is drawn into confrontation with the unspeakable to the very heart of the slave experience.

The second stage of the story’s narration makes space for the interrogation of the dilemma presented above, a crucial process that the dilemma tale engages in. Here, the audience engages actively in debate and reasoning, in argument and counter argument, in order to conclude meaningfully for the whole community. Morrison tries to answer the questions she raises in *Beloved*, by deploying multiple points of view to provide many different interpretations of the central dilemma confronting the protagonist. Thus, she gives priority to the call-and-response technique to “draw on the voice of the community,” thereby underscoring the shared nature of art and the importance of perspective.

Structured on these principles, *Beloved* presents a new conception of history, one, which unlike master narratives does not assert an authoritative version, but rather offers several contradictory, yet complementary versions which exist side by side. Morrison uses a layering of different voices and perspectives and an ever-switching point of view. Every character, even the dead ones, tell parts of the tale as Morrison moves in and out of the participant’s thoughts, allowing each one in turn to share with the reader their perceptions of the events. No one telling takes precedence over the other, but instead adds information
through the telling. This multiple narrative viewpoint enables her to give substance to a fictional past arrived at from many angles. The various voices act as chorus and witness to Sethe’s experiences. Each account of suffering has the haunting of 124 Bluestone Road at its centre, while the events, which caused it, are explained in ever-widening detail, embracing the composite experience of slavery. The diversity of the point of view creates a tapestry of people who interact—individuals joined by the past or present into a community. Such interaction between different levels creates a sense of community, a wholeness of the disparate views of the same event. In this respect, Morrison’s evocation of a community voice, a collective telling through multiple voices, is a strategy of the dilemma tale that Beloved manifests.

The multiple voiced narrations regarding Sethe’s infanticide reconstitutes and interrogates the truth of “what really happened.” The retelling involves improvisation, and a shifting point of view, as different tellers centre on and circle around Sethe’s act. The statements of the individual characters shape the ‘call’ to which other characters offer a ‘response’ by sharing their version of the episode in question. Each related story is unfinished however, leaving the rest to the reader’s imagination and thereby, embodying Morrison’s goal of creating a “truly aural novel” that “provides places and spaces for the readers to work and
participate,” to “fulfill” characterizations in a “humanizing” way. Besides Sethe’s version, three other versions of the unbearably shocking events are told from different perspectives.

After readers struggle to piece together the traumatic memories of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver earlier given in fragmentary, circular, and revisionary bits, they experience a jarring shift from African-American point of view to those of white slave masters. In the section that recounts the events of Sethe’s infanticide from the viewpoint of Schoolteacher, his nephew, and sheriff, Morrison’s omniscience allows the readers to enter their psyches shocking them with the pure racist ideology stated with rational certainty. From the slave-catcher’s brutal, dehumanizing point of view, Stamp paid is reduced to “a crazy old nigger” (B, p.149), while Schoolteacher is the disappointed property owner who sees right away that, “there was nothing to claim.” (B, p.149) His views of slaves as ruined livestock leads him to regard Sethe as a creature who has gone wild “due to the mishandling of the nephew who had over beat her and made her cut and run.”(B, p.150) This choice of narrator gives the reader an experience of master psychology and increases the horrific aspect of the passage, while simultaneously validating Sethe’s response to the system that Schoolteacher represents. Although in the process of
narrating, the narrator's direct evaluation is withheld, it is obvious that schoolteacher's perception though articulated is not endorsed.

Both Baby Suggs's and Stamp Paid's versions of Sethe's actions on that hot day, recall the feast the day before, and the subsequent withdrawal of the black community. Baby Suggs's reaction to the killing of her grandchild (we later deduce) is to abandon all hope of life and to resign herself to death because, despite her belief in God and her freedom, the white men nevertheless intruded into her private familial space, her "yard," and because she could not approve or condemn Sethe's "rough choice." (B, p.180) The first part brings up the ambiguity of her freedom, the second cause develops the theme of moral ambiguity even further—both of the choices open to Sethe on that day would have resulted in loss.

Stamp Paid's version of the same story returns to the same feast that Baby Suggs referred to and the resulting aftermath. This is another illustration of the dialogic nature of Morrison's narrative style. He retells from his viewpoint, what Baby Suggs has already recounted earlier. When he tries to explain to Paul D the events that took place by showing him a newspaper cutting with Sethe's picture, Paul D refuses to believe that the picture was Sethe's. Thus, Stamp Paid's story is unfinished and he even wonders whether the event really took place. However, the reader
“hears” his version and in this way, Stamp adds his voice to the chorus of voices.

Thus, by letting different people speak and not reconcile contradictory explanations and claims where they arise, the novel allows the reader—particularly in the absence of history and context—to empathize with most, if not all of its characters.

Sethe’s story is different from the other versions. When she tries to tell Paul D her account of the events, she finds herself circling around the subject. She tries to explain her motivation for killing her infant by talking about her memories of life at Sweet home. Her escape from the home had given her freedom to love and the conviction that her children must never live as she had. By trying to kill them she had foiled schoolteacher’s plans and put them “where they’d be safe.” (164) This brings us back to the dialogue that occurs between herself and Paul D referred to earlier. Maggie Sale argues that each of these elements involved in Sethe’s act “constitutes only a part of the whole, each needing to be balanced by a consideration of all the others” and therefore, urges the readers not to rest on any single element but to “move among positions and inhabit multiple perspectives.”

The significance of Sethe’s action, which the audience must examine, runs much deeper than it appears on surface. It is the dilemma
tale’s principal domain to look beneath the surface to reconstruct events and unearth the hidden meanings. Sethe’s action raises many ethical and moral issues about the consequences of slavery’s brutality, the question of motherhood, the issue of ownership, and of freedom. In Beloved, woman’s maternal role is central, but paradoxically, black slave women were rarely able to fulfill this role as the exigencies of slave life actively prevented them from doing so. Sethe’s intolerable situation is no different from that of many black characters in the novel. The difference lies in her response and view of motherhood. For instance, Baby Suggs, who suffered repeatedly from a system that steals a mother’s children from her, accepts the fact that her children are to be pawns in a game instigated, controlled, and played by white people. Sethe, however, rebels against these conditions and indulges in a love “too thick” which, Paul D recognizes as being “risky”, given the precarious nature of slave existence (B, p.45).

For Sethe, killing her children was an act of protection, of putting her babies to safety, but paradoxically, it proves to be an act of destruction, lending gruesome irony to the phrase, “mother love was a killer” (B, p.132). Thus, on the one hand, Sethe’s goal is to prevent her children from bearing a psychological scar of childhood like the one she herself bears. On the other hand, she sees her children as her property;
each one is a "life she had made;" each had "all parts of her" (B, p.163).

Through a dialogic layering of points of view, the text questions Sethe’s action. Her argument with Paul D demonstrates the ambiguity of morality and of maternal love. Thus perceived, Sethe’s actions become more complex forcing us to ask, does a mother have the right to take the life of her child? The "monstrous potential of love" that embodies Sethe’s dilemma is also the readers’ as Morrison invites them to respond to the issues thus presented. The question is also external to the text and yet related, in that the issue of mother love and the implicit questioning of a mother’s right to kill her child is itself topical in a moment in which many countries are torn by their reactions to abortions.

The effect of re-telling Sethe’s act of infanticide from different perspectives gives the readers a fuller picture and sense of "what really happened." Morrison also invites the reader’s perception in creating the ethical meaning of the text. By giving the readers access to multiple perspectives and interpretations, Morrison reveals that the issue is by no means simple. The dialogic style and structure of the text resists a single interpretation. Just as Ella listened for the "holes" (B, p.92) in Sethe’s story, the reader too has to wait for explanations and remember previously narrated bits to piece the stories together. In doing so, the
reader is forced to experience the same difficulty as the characters, and hence too, the difficulty to make moral judgments.

In presenting the memories and experiences of African-Americans of racism through storytelling techniques manifested in the dilemma tale form, Morrison challenges our own standards of morality. In the light of the damage, slavery had done to Sethe’s psyche; any judgment on our part would appear trite. If Sethe’s murderous act is condemned, Morrison also calls for our judgment of the system that can provoke such an action. Nevertheless, Sethe is not left off the hook, as she is not only imprisoned, but abandoned by Paul D, and held accountable by the community, by Denver, Beloved and ultimately, by herself. But the essential conflict presented in the novel, resists a single interpretation as borne out by the text, with its call-and-response patterns, the multiple points of view, and its open-endedness—all characteristics of the dilemma story.

In Beloved, not only is the ending inconclusive, Morrison also leaves many stories in the text unfinished or unexplained, thereby inviting the reader to respond, to think it over. A case in point is the mystery surrounding the appearance and disappearance of Beloved and her symbolic or other meanings in the text. We do not really know whether she is really Sethe’s daughter, a ghost come to life, a refugee, or all of these. Thus, Beloved is full of these gaps underlining the impossibility of
a totalized narrative. By writing into her narrative "these places and spaces" Morrison expects the reader to be active in creating with her, the meaning of the text. At the same time, by leaving her narrative open, she also demonstrates that there are other possibilities of looking at the history of her people. Beloved is only one version of the many possible versions of that history.

An analysis of both The Bluest Eye and Beloved as novels using the form and techniques of the dilemma tale reveals how Morrison in the latter novel, is able to define better, the dilemma or ethical choice that confronts the main character. She handles the manipulation of multiple viewpoints or perspectives more deftly in this novel. Both novels call for the reader's active participation in constructing the meaning of the text, but while The Bluest Eye seems to emphasize on the factor of witnessing and testifying, Beloved stresses on the moral and ethical ambiguity of the problem presented, and on the impossibility of a totalized narrative or unitary viewpoint.

Song of Solomon

Another novel, Song of Solomon is structured on the vernacular folk myth of the Flying African and once again exemplifies Morrison's call for literary expression based on the folk and cultural heritage. The African oral aesthetics in which the discourse of the dilemma tale is
predominant anchors the novel’s primary mythic and critical understructure. *Song of Solomon* deploys all the familiar, more explicit aspects of this fundamental Yoruba narrative structure. But the purpose here is to examine the less familiar features implicit in this folktale form. By doing so, other aspects of Morrison’s narrative style and strategy that have not yet been mentioned are included. Like the accomplished storyteller of tradition, her storytelling reflects in writing, the griot’s mastery of the complex verbal, musical, and memory skills. Just as the professional bard requires highly specialized skills and powers to perform meaningfully, so also Morrison, as storyteller, uses the techniques of oral folk stories to tell her stories more effectively. *Song of Solomon* contains many stories, but what is significant in Morrison is not the symbolic reproduction of particular oral accounts, but her awareness of the way oral cultures tell these tales.

As pointed out by Philip Page in “Circularity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved,*” the African folklore scholar, Harold Scheub in his studies of the Xhosa Nstomi, or the fanciful tale, refers to the vast stock of “core-clichés,” stock episodes, characters and images that are variedly used to suit the needs and interests of particular audiences or occasions. Thus, many African folk narratives build upon repetition of words, phrases, motifs, and images, used in overlapping or interlocking patterns to
generate a story. Such a use of story pattern is pertinent to Song of Solomon, in which the narrative develops through overlapping and interrelated themes such as naming and flight, flight and repeated abandonment, identity and heritage, singing and storytelling, natural phenomenon vs. the unnatural and so on. At the same time these story patterns explain the various elements of Morrison’s narrative strategy: a shifting narrative voice, repetition and circulation, episodic fragmentary retelling of the past, non-linearity and call-and-response motifs.

Of these ingenious narrative strategies employed by Morrison in her fiction, her story structure of contrapuntal narratives in which, characters tell stories to one another and to themselves within the framework of the larger story is relevant to a discussion of the techniques of the dilemma tale. In the dilemma tale, the extended narrators, or direct participants, the listeners and the community interrogate the ‘master narrative’ in this situation. The narrator adds to this story pattern by moving in and through the characters’ stories filling in the gaps. Thus, in Song of Solomon, Morrison makes use of the old folktale (of which many versions exist) that tells of a group of slaves who escaped slavery by acquiring wings and flying back to Africa. In Morrison’s story, the tale is converted into the song of Solomon, which, sung at various points becomes the key to the protagonist’s quest to understand his own identity.
Milkman must learn the names and the personal histories of his ancestors in order to understand better his own place in the world. Since for Morrison, identity is “a collective identity rather than individual construct,” Milkman must reconnect with history through language, community and family stories as well as the words of Solomon’s song.

Milkman solves his dilemma of place, past and identity through oral discourse and the words of Solomon’s song. The success of his southbound journey depends on his decoding this children’s song turned into a blues song by his aunt Pilate, which reveals his ancestry. This song, as Gay Wilentz points out, “illustrates the function of the African-American woman in passing on the stories of her culture’s painful yet courageous past.” Thus, by opening up the theme of “generational continuities” in the telling of the tale, Morrison adds another dimension to the tradition of storytelling. The idea of women fulfilling the role of taleteller and instructor, of transmitting cultural history and values through the generations is thus, ingeniously embedded into the narrative structure of the text.

The resulting medley of voices contributes to the revelation of individual and community making, which is the desired goal of such storytelling. The narration in *Song of Solomon* suggests that no one person can have enough information to narrate the entire story of a
character or a community. Thus, Milkman learns that it is not enough to
tell a single story, rather, many stories must be told in the hope that they
might consequently illuminate one another. Characters in the text, as well
as the readers, can only seek meaning and understanding through shared
memories, interpretations, and imaginings that combine as stories. This
fits the description of the novel as a dilemma tale, which privileges
multiple points of view. In *Song of Solomon*, as also in all her novels,
Morrison uses many tellers whose stories are either variants of the same
story or else, so interwoven into the fabric of the main story that they
cannot be separated. This makes for continual re-evaluation by the reader
since each version of the story is different in perspective, motive, and
interpretation.

The function of such re-evaluation within the critical framework of
the dilemma tale is that it helps “the participants and the entire
community to cope with the world around them and improve their
understanding.”32 In *Song of Solomon*, in the telling of the relationship
between Milkman’s parents, the narrator tells one story, Macon Dead tells
another, and Ruth Dead tells her own version. Presented with different
perceptual categories, it becomes problematic for Milkman; he has no
idea which version to believe since his knowledge of his parents
corroborates both accounts. His own views, as well as the reader’s, have
to be revised, because the listener/reader is “forced into a kind of retrospective analysis that acknowledges the subjective and constitutive nature of truth: (he is) compelled to acknowledge the relative truth inherent in each narrative construction.” 33 Thus, these contrapuntal narratives produce tension and interplay of ideas through multiple perspectives or “voices.” They complicate the reader’s interpretation of the issues and make it difficult, if not impossible, for an authoritative response.

Morrison’s design of stories as contrapuntal narratives creates a network of cultural storytelling in which one story loops into the stories of inner stories, generating layers of meaning. Thus, all the stories in Song of Solomon ultimately belong to the same network of relations as the different tellers produce variants of the same story. The teller joined to the listener is in turn, joined to the tellers and listeners of the other stories together building a community of tellers, listeners, and shared stories. This is the ultimate aim of all types of storytelling. Milkman must learn to listen to the stories of other people and understand the significance of shared history through shared stories and traditions, before he can communicate his own story. Through the heard testimony of Reverend Cooper, the fragments of the past provided by Macon Jr., Pilate, Circe and Susan Byrd and finally the singing children of Shalimar,
Milkman can transform himself from a man alienated from his culture into one who embraces it.

The importance of the endless iterations of these stories to black storytelling is that they enable characters to share knowledge and to open up aspects of texts that make for new ending possibilities, new interpretations, and narrative perspectives. Moreover, since the growth and identity of the ethnic character and cultural knowledge are related, storytelling plays an all-important role in imparting this crucial knowledge. In this connection dilemma tales have been called “teaching stories” which played an integral part in the moral and ethical training in many traditional African societies, where basic training in a particular culture’s oral arts and skills is an essential part of children’s traditional education. In fact, as Gay Wilentz proclaims, “the telling of the tale is paramount to the survival of the culture.”

In *Song of Solomon*, the narrative develops through iteration and re-iteration of episodes, imagery, symbols, and motifs. For instance, the folksong of Sugarman who “done fly away” is an oft repeated motif in Milkman’s life. The song is a means of maintaining a link to a forgotten family history. In this regard, Marilyn Mobley draws our attention not only to “the song in the story” but also to “the story in the song.” Pilate first sings this song and later, the children of Shalimar sing another
version of it. The story in the song records the clues to Milkman’s heritage and inspires him to research the details of his family roots. Each time Milkman hears the song, he alters it through a series of interpretations, until, he finally constructs a version of it that fits his idea of what he believes is, the truth about his ancestral origins. By assembling and connecting the fragments of folk stories told to him by Pilate, Circe and Susan Byrd, Milkman tries to decode the ‘riddle’ in the song. In this way too, he learns how to be creative as a storyteller. In the end, he becomes the “improvising bluesman” paying tribute to the dying Pilate through his own improvisatory extension of her old Sugarman blues. However, as the novel’s ambiguous ending shows, this new story of Milkman’s life is only one of the numerous possible stories that can be considered alongside the other stories.

*Song of Solomon* has many oral qualities drawn from black culture, not least of which is the technique of “digression.” Since folktales are performed live by a griot, the opportunity poses itself to meander away from the story at hand. Sometimes digression may be a means of explaining events that some listeners may not understand. An important part of this tradition would therefore be the improvisational quality suggested by “meandering” about ready-made stories. *Song of Solomon* demonstrates such a technique in the way Morrison lets the omniscient
narrator “meander” in the leisurely pursuit of stray details. The narrative simply starts and goes on unfolding and meandering in various directions all at once. The very opening of Song of Solomon illustrates this technique.

The novel opens with the dramatic event of an insurance agent apparently about to undertake a suicidal jump from the top of the local hospital called Mercy. Yet Morrison keeps the perspective away from him as the narrator goes on instead, to give a long explanation on how the street called “Not Doctor Street” got its name. Our attention is then drawn to the crowd which has gathered below Robert Smith, the suicidal insurance agent, and then allowed to slowly zoom in on a certain pregnant lady, who, at that moment drops her basket of red velvet rose petals. In the ensuing scramble, Smith is forgotten as our attention is drawn to another woman in the crowd “who suddenly burst out into song” (SoS, p.5). Her song, which is in the vernacular, is intriguing, but at this point, we cannot understand its import or function in the narration. In fact, there is no time to dwell on it, as the narrator next goes on to describe the reaction of the ‘hospital people’ to the happenings. By the end of the section, Robert Smith has leapt from the building, yet the reader has no clue as to why he had attempted to “fly away.” Morrison’s narrative strategy here is to drop an unexplained fact on the reader, only
to veer away into other matters, and then return with more information about the initial fact, then change direction again and so on. In this way, Morrison imbues the narrative with an improvisational quality, which is imitative of oral literature, and we experience the feeling of hearing a story being told.

The non-linear movements that Morrison’s narratives thus follow are an aspect of the oral style. Although *Song of Solomon* traces the life of Milkman Dead from birth to “death,” the narrative does not follow a straightforward progression. Instead, the narrative doubles backwards and forward in time in a circling motion. The narrative flashbacks and shifts in subject repeatedly interrupt the storyline as the narrator backtracks through time to account for the present. This stems from the fact that in the novel, the depiction of time is not a linear progression, but an interweaving of past and present events in an ever-widening circle. Morrison draws from this West African concept of cyclical time that view the world as living—“subject to the law of becoming, of old age and death.” 38 Thus, this reinforces the notion that a sense of one’s self is never possible until one accepts the past since the past and present exist in dynamic relationship with each other. Since an important part of Milkman’s quest is self-discovery, he can only do this by looking
backwards to discover the linkages that will bring his past into relation with his present.

We can infer that Morrison’s meandering narrative strategy imitates the telling of folktales. For instance, since the dilemma tale is a platform that allows the representation of many voices and ideas, there are bound to be digressions, deviations, and detours in such a narrative situation. Moreover, the plethora of names, the shifting chronology, the excessive dialogue, and the layers of individual and personal histories create a mosaic of narrative that makes meaning seem elusive. In fact, the reader’s task is similar to that of the protagonist, who must find the meaning in his complicated life story.

Morrison’s recognition of the twin roles of author and reader in the creation of literary works and their interpretation raises a question. What stand shall a reader take when the author encourages audience participation? We have already identified how in her works, the narrator refrains from taking any character’s stance or letting any character’s judgment control the narrative. In the narration of a story, each character participates with different bits of the same story, and in this process, the call-and-response structure of narrative also invites the audience’s participation in creating the whole story. The multiple versions of Ruth and her father’s deathbed scene and the several possible meanings to the
ending of *Song of Solomon* are but two outstanding examples, which illustrate the complexity of the relationship between author, reader, and text. The reader's perceptions are always changing as the text moves us in and out of different points of view. Thus, the reader finds it difficult to take a fixed stance in the book.

Such a situation has led many critics to aver that Morrison's fiction provides more questions than answers. Yet, Morrison's employment of these narrative strategies based on the themes, structure, and function of dilemma tales oblige the audience to participate individually in order to acquire group identity. She thus shifts the burden of interpretation, judgment, and resolution onto the reader. The reader can only be guided towards a narrative judgment or interpretation that is influenced by the permeation of black oral traditions that make the narrative value laden. At the conclusion of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison finally shifts out of the third-person narrative and opts for the second-person voice:

> For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (emphasis mine, *SoS*, p.337)

Here, Morrison interrupts the third-person narrative to address the audience directly. The result is a blurring of distinctions among speaker, character, and reader in which the reader is encouraged to identify with Milkman. The intimacy that transpires between author and reader adds to the orality of the text, of the reader being involved in an intimate
conversation with the author. The reader is drawn as it were, personally into the world of Milkman: a situation is created wherein the reader must draw conclusions from the story not only as an observer, but also as a participant in the events.

The inconclusive and controversial ending of *Song of Solomon* is an example of Morrison’s resistance to closure in the Western sense. Unlike Western folktales in which all end up living “happily ever after,” African folktales, Morrison reminds us, “are told in such a way that whoever is listening is in it and can shape it and figure it out. It’s not over just because it stops.” 39 Morrison allows us the freedom of interpretation depending upon what we believe takes place after the novel ends, and on how strongly we believe the folktales on which the novel is based. Thus, in the words of Gay Wilentz, “the question the reader should ponder in this dilemma tale is not whether Milkman lives or dies; rather this dilemma tale is whether Milkman lives or flies! Which perception of reality are we to believe?” 40

*Paradise*

*Paradise* illustrates the fullest example of how the dilemma tale type may serve as an interpretive frame for explicating Morrison’s narrative techniques as originating from the oral tradition. At the same time, the reasons for her conscious appropriation of these traditions in her
work in the larger context of postcolonial theory and history is also emphasized.

_Paradise_ completes a trilogy of historical novels that began with _Beloved_ and _Jazz_ in which Morrison is concerned with "re-membering" the historical past. Morrison's position in these novels is to revise and reclaim the narratives of African-American history, particularly from a female point of view, by dwelling on a past that the dominant narrative has tried to erase. African-American separateness has often emphasized the absolute importance of African roots in the formation of an African-American ethnic identity as counterpoised to that of the white majority. However, unlike her earlier works in which she has focused on a reclaimed African heritage as the basis for a different and separate identity, _Paradise_ examines the way African-Americans are engaged in the construction of a national identity based on an historical master narrative. Morrison is particularly concerned with how certain versions of history become master narratives, and in this context, the novel offers a critique of the traditional American paradigm of nationhood and identity formation with roots in Puritanism that has been the foundational principles of the United States.⁴¹

Chiji Akoma in "The 'Trick' of Narratives: Memory, and Performance in Toni Morrison's _Paradise_,"⁴² states that Morrison
operates within the African American folkloric medium and invests the historical contents of her narrative with a mythic dimension. Others have also emphasized how *Paradise* specifically explores the relationship of history and myth and the means by which national history itself becomes inscribed as mythic history, as well as the practices of exclusion that have characterized notions of America as paradise.\(^{43}\) It is a well known fact that Morrison predominantly draws from the black oral tradition to redress the limited perspectives of mainstream American history. Although for her, using the oral tradition in this manner “is both an act of resistance and a process of communal validation,” in *Paradise*, she “refuses to accept the affirming value of orality at face value”\(^ {44}\) in spite of its significance in the African-American aesthetic. She applies to oral history the same critical examination to which written history has been subjected by illustrating the subjectivity, distortions, and abuses of power to which oral history is also vulnerable. Morrison implies that the oral transmission and preservation of a community’s history can also have many shortcomings. Thus, the novel suggests the limits of any critical position that overly celebrates the capacities of the oral to convey truth. In this context, Morrison once again demonstrates a crucial aspect of her aesthetic – the African-American oral mode—in her deployment of the dilemma type tale to structure her narrative. Fundamental to *Paradise* is
the ascertaining of truth through wrestling with the multiplicity of perspectives and open-ended interpretations that the novel opens up for author, characters and readers alike. Like the dilemma tales, which set out to resolve problematic issues through collective observation, reasoning and critical evaluation, the novel provides a contemplative space for readers to debate the issues raised and to solve the dilemmas on their own.

In *Paradise*, the structure of the dilemma tale allows Morrison to organize her narrative around the thematic concerns she began in the earlier works, that of history, place, and community. Her use of storytelling as historiography in the novel comes to the fore as she examines the making of an oral community narrative. In this process, memory plays a crucial role. Broadly speaking, *Paradise* interrogates how memory shapes the narrative of a community’s past, and particularly, how it serves to perpetuate a patriarchal order. The novel, at its core, presents a conflict between one “group’s resolve to remember the past in a certain way as a matter of duty, and another group’s determination to experience their past in a liberating manner.” By employing storytelling to highlight the subjective aspect of memory that relies upon omission in some details to preserve others, Morrison refigures these omissions as sites of countermemories of alternative
fragmented, subjugated narratives that oppose the notion of a totalizing master narrative. Thus, Morrison’s representation of multiple points of view and voices, which not only challenge a unitary viewpoint, but also provides space for previously unheard of stories and viewpoints form an important narrative technique of the dilemma tale.

In *Paradise*, Morrison creates a microcosm of America in the utopian all-black community of Ruby, Oklahoma. On the first level of narration based on the structural architecture of the dilemma tale, *Paradise* first narrates the founding of the all-black town of Haven in 1890 by former free black citizens. The founders, referred to by the community as the “Old Fathers,” had fled the white racism of the South, only to be rejected by fellow African-Americans at “Fairly”—a settlement of light skinned blacks—because of their darker skin colour. This rebuff, known as the “Disallowing,” provides the impetus for a westward migration to Haven, where they establish their own community. The descendants of its founding fathers — the 8-rocks, so called because of their impeccable dark skin — led by the Morgan twins, Steward and Deacon, attempt to reconstruct “exactly” the founding of Haven in Ruby (*P*, p.113). The Disallowing establishes the historical reasons for Ruby’s defensiveness and intolerance for “anybody but themselves” (*P*, p.13).
In pursuing their ideals in freedom, the fathers of Ruby must enforce their own contemporary disallowings in order to keep the past relevant and to maintain a patriarchal authority rooted in the past. Thus, Ruby is an isolated town, cut off from the cultural, political and economic events of the rest of America. Named for a sister and mother who died, apparently because of the arduous trek, the town is defined by a conservative ideal of womanhood and by an unspoken “blood rule” that forbids its inhabitants to marry light-skinned people: transgression of this “blood rule” would result in rejection and loss of their 8-rock status. For this reason too, the Morgan twins, whose families have kept their purity intact, form the oligarchy. Not only do they control every essential aspect of the town, they are also firmly insistent on preserving the narrative of Ruby’s history. This narrative is plainly oral, kept alive in the memory of the older generation, particularly, the twins, Steward and Deacon Morgan who between them remember the details of everything that ever happened— things they witnessed and things they have not. (P, p.13)

Patricia Storace rightly observes that the elders of Ruby want “the perpetual overarching authority of the creator at the moment of creation.” For, in utilizing their oral recounting to construct a master narrative the Morgan twins also intend to establish moral authority. Thus, Ruby’s communal history, not only becomes a tightly controlled version,
but also a text that cannot be rewritten or reinterpreted. Morrison, however, questions such a dogmatic approach to history. Hence, like the dilemma story where the issue of dilemma is essential, the novel initiates arguments about what the inhabitants of Ruby are to make of their historical legacy. The motivations of the town elders in preserving the principals and beliefs on which their community is founded is called into question as the events that follow reveal how the moral basis for this belief has eroded. When the younger generation begins to question the values, behaviour and mythmaking of their elders’ communal historiography, the 8-rock leaders are opposed to changing the extant narrative. Thus, as in the dilemma tale structure, the novel at this point, juxtaposes a number of dichotomies to be debated by the audience. This allows for the interrogation and reconstitution of history by providing a variety of perspectives that call upon the reader to examine critically.

The second narrative level of the dilemma tale begins with the moral debate around the theme of tradition and change. In *Paradise*, the conflict between the younger generation and their fathers over the correct words inscribed on the Oven—a centrepiece carried from the original site of Haven to Ruby, which had functioned as the communal hearth, initiates the debate. The debate surrounding the Oven’s motto, resulting over a missing word, involves the question of authority and authorship.
The problem is not only how to interpret the text but also how to determine what the text is. The ruling generation's declaration that the motto is "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," demand a strict adherence to the old order since it justifies their retention of power and unchallenged authority. In contrast, Misner and the younger sons want a greater participation in the creation of new myths and new freedoms. For them history is open and progressive. Their claim is that the motto is "Be the Furrow" and by changing it later to "We are the Furrow" (p.298), transforms what is a warning into a self-assertive statement.

The dispute over whether the Oven’s words should be "Beware the Furrow of His Brow," "Be the Furrow of His Brow," "We are the Furrow of Her Brow," or "We are the Furrow of His Brow," proves that there is not one but several possible mottos. Moreover, like the dilemma tale they continually create meanings that require the active participation of both characters and readers alike. What needs to be remembered here is how in traditional, patriarchal societies, respect for one’s fathers and ancestors is sacred. At the same time, the problem for the community in Ruby was that the older generation had frozen their history: they had "nothing to say about themselves. Nothing to pass on" In addition, they also disallow the younger generation to participate in the creation of their own history,
thereby denying to them the call-and-response mode of communication that is so vital to the oral tradition.

The multiplicity of the mottos proves that there is no reliable way of determining which is the correct or authoritative one. Like the dilemma tale which conveys the ‘truth’ of many truths, the various interpretations of the mottos carry moral and ethical value that can improve understanding. But at this point, the elders of Ruby are not ready to tolerate divergent interpretations of the town’s past. They summon the sole surviving member of the original Haven settlers, Esther, to corroborate their interpretation of the missing word in the Oven’s motto. However, since she is unable to read, her testimony is based on only “finger memory”, a fact that is not acceptable to the young people. Morrison further problematizes the matter by interrogating the permanence of the written word by having the written words on the oven’s lip disappear. At the same time, she highlights the vulnerability of oral histories when it is used to suppress dialogue and dissent, or used for narrow political or selfish ends. Because of the ruling fathers’ attempt to freeze a remembered past into repressive dogma, new divisions and rifts will emerge among Ruby’s inhabitants culminating in the murderous assault on the Convent, an ‘open house’ sheltering a group of unconventional women. As the novel reveals, Morrison is concerned not
only with one dilemma, but also with several. Like the tale-within-a-tale pattern of oral storytelling, what we find here is a similar pattern of a-dilemma-within-a-dilemma.

As in all her other novels, Morrison makes extensive use of another fundamental characteristic of the dilemma tale—the technique of multiple points of view, in order to reconstruct the experiences and perspectives of the characters to resolve a dilemma. For example, in the chapter titled “Divine,” the novel’s characters argue over the meanings of the cross in relation to love and divinity. Not only do the ministers of the Church disagree in their views regarding the meaning of the cross, but also, as Morrison shows by moving the narrative perspective around the room, so does the congregation. Thus, following the structural and thematic preoccupation of the dilemma tale, Morrison tries to provide a literary space that throws up answers instead of nailing them down to a single definition. In privileging multiple perspectives, she invites readers to reimagine and reexamine the ideas embodied on the cross itself as a symbol of multiplicity that involves the making of difficult choices about conflicting moral values.

The central dispute over the Oven’s words also reveals how the conservative approach of the men to history is a gendered one in which their women apparently play no role. However, Morrison provides room
for the women’s competing versions of Ruby’s history, although they remain hidden. Thus, throughout the novel, women’s statements form a succession of explanations that reveal the distorted viewpoint of the men. A critical look at the perspectives of the women in the text will provide the various counter narratives to the men’s: both structurally and practically, the women’s stories disrupt and correct Ruby’s official narrative. The multiplicity of interpretations of these alternative narratives is itself constructed on the difficulty of choice or moral debate that is at the core of dilemma stories.

The individual chapter headings of Paradise are named after different women characters: these include women against whom the tale is structured even if they appear only briefly. The accounts of each of the convent women suggest that the novel’s true story is to be related through women’s stories. Their stories, personalities, names, and actions reinforce the men’s convictions that the women are evil. Like other female characters from Morrison’s canon who are seen as pariahs, these women are scapegoats like Pecola on whom the men of Ruby can pass on their own ugliness; like Poland, China and Miss Marie they are whores; like Sula and Pilate they are sorceresses; like Sethe they are murderesses; like Violet they are crazy and dangerous.
The most radical of these female counter narratives of patriarchal history in the novel is the one Patricia Best is documenting in the section "Patricia." Although she is the daughter of one of the founding members of Ruby, Patricia is also, the only surviving light-skinned resident and the object of the town’s disapproval: her father, Roger, had broken the unspoken ‘blood rule’ by marrying “a wife of racial tampering” (p. 197). From her position as an outsider and a woman, Patricia attempts to assemble a counter narrative of Ruby’s rigidly controlled patriarchal ancestral narrative based on written evidence. However, when the town’s residents object to her prying questions and shut “invisible doors” on her, Patricia’s efforts take a turn towards the personal. At this point, Morrison deploys another fundamental characteristic of the dilemma tale—the politics of interpretation and how they are embedded in interpretation.49

Patricia’s narrative efforts reflect the struggle over meaning and interpretation that dilemma tales engender. When she comes across gaps and, according to her, willful omissions of known facts by the town’s citizens whom she attempts to interview, she abandons any pretenses to “objective comment.” Openly seeking a fresh viewpoint, she interprets the facts “freely and insightfully” believing that “she alone had the required emotional distance” (p.188). Her interest in the absences and silences left by the patriarchal version of history leads her to contemplate
the names blotted out in family Bibles. Ultimately, what is worth noting in Pat’s genealogy is not Zachariah’s founding of Haven but rather his brother’s absence at the event, underlined by her observation of the erasure of his name in the family Bible. The story is one of several fragmented narratives that have been repressed in the “town’s official story” in order to provide for a mythical, unified, patriarchal vision. Some of these fragmented narratives include those of the women. These women, as Patricia notices are referred to only by their first or generalized last name, and include women like her mother, Delia, whom Ruby’s community allows to die at childbirth rather than let a white doctor into the community to save her, but whose story never forms a part of the official narrative. In addition, Patricia’s genealogy reveals many cases of incestuous marriages that took place in order to comply with the unspoken “blood rule,” and which perhaps explains events such ‘four damaged infants” being born in one family. In this way, the novel provides space for several unacknowledged, multivoiced stories that compete with the official story of Ruby’s past and present history. In this way too, not only is the reader’s interpretation of the issues made more complicated, it also underlines the politics of interpretation that dilemma tales engender.
As the novel suggests, Pat’s genealogy has the power to disrupt and expose the authorized story of Ruby, and the novel at times seem to support the claims and speculations that she makes. In fact, as some critics have noted, her role parallels that of both author and reader. In her role as compiler of charts and writer of notes, Patricia is similar to the author writing the novel, but in her efforts to interpret and determine what is happening, she parallels the reader’s act of interpreting the novel’s text. Through Pat’s active responses to the events in the novel, Morrison implicitly invites readers to engage with the text and the events. However, as convincing her analysis is, the novel does not allow the reader to endorse any single perspective or meaning. Moreover, although her genealogy uncovers several discredited stories, they remain hidden, silenced narratives, furtively stored only in the memory of the women. Their silence as well as the other residents’ silences about the absences in Ruby’s history only serves to “support” the “official story.” In this, Pat herself is guilty of complicity in the perpetuation of practices of racial and gender exclusion: in a debate about historicism engaged with Richard Misner, she snubs Misner as an outsider, thereby replicating 8-rock behaviour.

Thus, in what is one of the text’s most enigmatic gestures, Morrison makes Patricia burn all her research, charts and notes of her
town's history project. Now she has no textual proof for her claims and her act undermines her position as a textual historiographer of Ruby. In a sense, Pat's act underscores the limits of oral and written histories, and the potential of counterhistory. As is exemplified in the debate over the Oven's inscription, "Paradise affirms neither written nor oral culture, however, showing instead the inherent unreliability of all human communication." And once again, one of most essential characteristics of the dilemma tale, which is to pose questions or problems for the listeners to resolve, is called into play here as the reader is invited to ponder over the reasons for and implications of Pat's impulsive act. Morrison seems to be suggesting that no single text, version or interpretation is adequate to account for the whole truth, or provide an understanding of the families and power structures in Ruby. As such, despite her role as model for author and reader, Morrison questions Patricia's methods as being too closed and deterministic. Between the monologic version of Ruby's "official" oral history and Patricia's conscientious but cold and calculating written account, the whole truth of Ruby's history remains unaccounted for. Morrison suggests there is something "more profound"—something only the spiritual Lone DuPres recognizes, "the 'trick' of life and its 'reason'"(p.272) that challenges a view of history as objective and scientific. The novel seeks to reveal that
historical knowledge is always “ruled by motive and wish, a choice of one way, one interpretation, one possibility, out of many” and hence, there are often no totalizing accounts and answers. This important function of the dilemma tale is revealed here.

A major event that is also subject to such open-ended, multiple interpretations is the brutal massacre at the Convent. Employing the strategy of pastiche, or “repetition and variation,” which she often uses, Morrison calls attention to this multiplicity by narrating the episode twice. The first telling gives only the bare threads of this central event with many missing details. In retelling the story of the raid a second time, Morrison supplies more details, but still leaves many questions unanswered. The strategy of repetition and variation that she employs emphasizes her point that there is always more than one version, and therefore, more than one interpretation of any story. Such a strategy insists on the reader’s continual and multiple reworking of the novel’s contents, particularly on issues of interpretation.

To make matters even more complex, Morrison employs a nonlinear, open-ended approach that does away with the order of chronology as the story ambles along with details provided by association, one event recalling another, circling back to another, to present a piece of isolated history. Her technique of jumping from one
scene or perspective to another leaving the readers suspended with unexplained bits of information is a familiar one. Nevertheless, in *Paradise* Morrison more than usual confronts readers with puzzling questions that are answered only many pages later and sometimes never. In using this technique, Morrison deliberately co-opts the readers into the active process of meaning-making as a communal enterprise: meaning is both a creative process and interpretative exercise to be engaged in by both the author and readers. Instead of allowing the reader to arrive at some kind of “truth” as might be systematically revealed at the end of the book, the novel instead follows the example of the dilemma tale, which strives to convey to the community the meaningful ‘truth’ of many truths. In doing so, the reader gains a better understanding of the complexities that underlie human affairs.

In *Paradise*, Morrison does not only place heavy interpretive demands on readers, the novel’s characters too, continually struggle with interpretations of their realities and each other. Following the men’s brutal attack on the Convent, the citizens of Ruby try to make sense of the event. Just as there are two narrations of the same event, there are also “two official editions of the original story” (*P*, p.296). Besides these “official” versions, there are at least three more versions postulated by Patricia Best, which are completely different from the men’s versions.
The coexistence of different stories calling on and responding to each other stresses Morrison’s point of indeterminacy.

Trying to sort through the various versions to get at the truth is an unsatisfying experience for Richard Misner, who had been away when the raid occurred:

Other than Deacon Morgan, who had nothing to say, every one of the assaulting men had a different tale and their families and friends... supported them, recasting, inventing misinformation.” (P, p.297)

Thus, he turns to Lone DuPres, a presumed seer with spiritual powers, to fill in the missing details. Lone, as her name suggests, is the lone character who understands both the circumstances and troubled lives of the Convent women, and the real reason behind the men’s attack on these women. But Morrison resists privileging Lone’s version above the others by not allowing her account to appear credible in the eyes of many Rubyites. Thus, the people of Ruby as well as the readers must contend with the uncertainty of truth illustrated by differing accounts and interpretations. In doing so, they must also recognize the limitless possibilities that exist in any endeavor that looks at a people’s history.

Similarly, no one in the novel is able to explain with complete authority, the strange disappearance of the Convent women nor does Morrison explain to the reader their later reappearance in another-earthly realm. Morrison requires that the readers use their imagination to see
beyond the visible, “to see the unseen signs of historical, psychological, spiritual, and economic forces.” Since she places such heavy interpretive demands on the reader, Morrison also guides her readers by suggesting an alternative approach through the examples of Lone and Consolata. These two women, as the novel reveals, have access to supernatural ways of knowing, interpreting and healing, including the art of reviving the dead that challenge logical or rational beliefs. For Lone, this is “stepping in,” while for Consolata it is “seeing in” (P, p.245; p.247) to another person in an act of total empathy. This gives readers a clue to the extent that they must go in order to achieve complete understanding. Similarly, Morrison suggests the possibility of new interpretations through Anna Flood’s vision of a window and Misner’s, of a door at the site of the Convent. Thus, although Ruby’s redemption is never definitive, she still offers consolation, in Deacon Morgan’s change of heart, and in Lone’s pronouncement that “God has given Ruby a second chance” (P, p. 297).

At the novel’s ending, Morrison evokes enigmatic images of the women of the Convent lying on a beach gleaming with refuse, making it difficult to tell whether they are angels or martyrs. Like all the difficult choices she earlier confronts the readers with, Morrison’s view of a paradisiacal community is also open to debate. In reimagining paradise as
a place not on some transcendent plane, but “down here” on earth, and by suggesting that it is a condition not yet fully achieved (P, p.318), she calls for an interrogation of the idea of paradise itself.\textsuperscript{55} In examining both mainstream American and the traditional African-American conception of race, history, and nation, and in critiquing the idea of American exceptionalism present in African-American discourse,\textsuperscript{56} Morrison encourages her readers to reimagine a more inclusive and accepting community by constructing an earthly paradise made up of individuals representing different racial, ethnic, and national backgrounds.

The ambiguous ending of Paradise, has provoked various readings and interpretations. This is exactly what Morrison wants since open-endedness is a final characteristic of the dilemma tale that leaves its conclusion unresolved. By leaving the narrative open, she engages the reader beyond the text to continue with the interrogation that she has initiated, to respond to her call of participating in an interactive dialogue that is ongoing.

\textbf{Trickster Narratives: Redefining Culture, Reinventing Narrative form}

The trickster tale and character are two other important components of the African-American folk tradition. The trickster is a familiar figure in many other ethnic culture myths as well, as the escapades of the Winnebago trickster Wakdjunkaga, Loki, a trickster god
of the Norse sagas, Hércules, the Greek trickster god, and the Monkey King of Chinese myths illustrate. The trickster figure has materialized diversely as Coyote, Nanabozho, Anansi, and Bre’er Rabbit (to name a few). The prevalence of tricksters in virtually all cultures emphasizes the centrality of this archetype to the imaginative self-perception of all societies. As such, his resurgence in the works of recent ethnic writers suggests the importance of this figure in combating racial and gender oppression and for affirming cultural and personal identity. Although the trickster’s archetypal status, his relation to gender and to ethnicity, and his post-modern transformation remain contentious issues, the basic cultural work he performs is not in doubt. In African storytelling traditions, for instance, the exploits of the West African trickster-god, Esu-Elegbara (or his variations throughout the African Diaspora), and how he outwitted physically or socially stronger opponents, find extensive representation. African-American writing often displays a folkloristic conception of humankind, an ambivalent consciousness arising from bicultural-identity, which focuses on survival and the politics of language.

In recent times, the trickster has appeared as a key figure in many novels, particularly by contemporary ethnic women writers, such as in Maxine Hong Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey (1987), and Louise
Erdrich’s *The Bingo Palace* (1994). Toni Morrison too, situates the trickster as a central character in her examination of culture, gender, and identity. In several of her novels, she expands on and refigures the traditional African-American trickster, and presents us with conflicting versions of female tricksters, which both challenge racial and gender stereotypes and offer new alternatives. However, the emphasis at this point is on how Morrison evokes trickster strategies to revise oral traditions and creates new trickster tales that have important implications for the novel form itself. Like the dilemma tale, the trickster tale may also serve as an interpretive frame to explain Morrison’s narrative strategies, since she “shows us the process by which folklore is created, transforming historic folk materials into a new folk-based literature.”

An analysis of the narrative form in the works of Toni Morrison must necessarily account for her cultural context, the disruptions and breaks, spaces, and multiple voices or perspectives in her narratives. Examining the trickster narrative to identify its defining characteristics will reveal that it shares similar features with the dilemma stories, particularly in their potential to redefine culture and reinvent narrative form. For instance, Morrison’s familiar technique of employing multiple perspectives and rejecting a clear authorial stance in telling her stories can be explained as drawing on the trickster’s ability to put on various
masks and to embody multiple perspectives. The trickster's multivalence and elusiveness suggest that no single point of view alone is substantial: meaning is created through the incorporation of all views and perspectives, including those of the author and reader. In continually shifting from one perspective to another, her narrative is like the trickster who represents different levels of meaning within a given text. Hence, like the dilemma tale form, her trickster narratives also emphasize a recursive, non-linear structure.

The social and collective nature of storytelling accounts for yet another important characteristic of the trickster tale that it shares with the dilemma tale. Since the story's meaning is embedded in the telling, storytelling is a profoundly interactive process. The cultural intersection that the social process of storytelling provides between the individual and the community, initiates an open-ended dialogue between storyteller and listeners. A concomitant of this is the fact that tricksters are accomplished storytellers whose mastery over words enables them to exercise power over their listeners. Similarly, Morrison as trickster writer herself uses storytelling to shape her novels, to foster and create cultural identity, to connect the individual to a shared culture, and to set up dialogue among characters and readers. Just as the dilemma tale also provided an arena that promoted discussions that tested the verbal wits of both participants
and audience, the trickster novel too, emphasizes the reader’s crucial role in recreating the story. Morrison, as usual, not only invites, but even demands reader involvement. By becoming involved in the interpretive work, and engaging in dialogue with the text, the readers are compelled to constantly revise their views.

Another relevant characteristic of the trickster tale is that there is no formal closure. The dialogue that is set up among the characters and reader never concludes as is the case in the trickster narrative. The author leaves things open-ended or ambiguous, forcing the reader to play a more active role in the construction of meaning. In this connection, the gaps and ellipses that are found in the trickster narratives of Kingston, Morrison and other writers of dual ethnic or cultural backgrounds, take on greater meaning. Recalling the trickster’s place at the crossroads, the indeterminate borderlands between two worlds, the gap is a reminder of the boundaries of their dual worlds that have continually to be mediated. Thus, in her novels’ lack of closure, and privileging of different perspectives and voices to emphasize dialogue, community, and the social process of storytelling, Morrison’s trickster strategies replicate the structural techniques of dilemma tales. However, there are also major differences between the two forms.
A significant difference is that the trickster is not only an actual character in the novel but is also a linguistic and stylistic principle. His transformation in the literary context is effected through the medium of language. In this connection, Henry Gates Jr. locates the black vernacular roots of the African-American literary tradition in the Signifying Monkey, a descendent of Esu-Elegbara, whose power and identity lie in his verbal artistry. Thus, the “Signifying Monkey” is an important trope of the African Trickster and, according to Gates Jr., “dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language.” Since, as Gates says, the monkey is not only a master of technique, but is himself “technique or style, or the literariness of literary language, he is the great Signifier.” The trickster’s linguistic world operates on rules that he/she devises, and which are made precisely to be broken to keep signification evolving and essential. In Morrison’s novels, “the trickster operates on a structural and linguistic level...embodies her wandering, multidimensional point of view and her use of masking and signifying to disrupt and create meaning.” Viewing the trickster as a rhetorical agent provide a useful framework for an appropriate understanding of Morrison’s narrative technique.

Another important aspect of the trickster tale is that tricksters are personifications of disruption and disorder, and as such, they question,
manipulate and disrupt society’s rules. They are “both folk heroes and wanderers on the edges of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries.”62 Their trickiness is revealed not so much by their pranks, but in their agility and elusiveness. They are defined by their mobility, freedom, autonomy, and ability to survive virtually anything. The traditional trickster is one who “possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being.”63

The central paradox embodied in the trickster figure is their rule-breaking, transgressive nature which creates a conflicting relationship with community, but which at the same time defines and maintains culture. This clarifies both the thematic concerns and the structure of Morrison’s works. She disrupts expectations, challenges the status quo, but also reaffirms communal values just a trickster figure does. Her most prominent narrative techniques of using a meandering, shifting narrative voice, her incorporation of multiple points of view and voices, and her ability to engage her readers in meaning-making dialogue, are all part of her “trickster aesthetics.”64 Her innovative use of this modern incarnation of the trickster highlights his/her relevance to the African-American cultural world, a world in which boundaries have continually to be
mediated and assumptions challenged. Like the trickster who shifts and
disguises the boundaries, undoes and redraws the traditional connections,
Morrison, through trickster strategies, blurs the boundaries between self
and other, male and female, the real and fantastic, and even between story
and audience. The characteristics of the trickster, according to Gates, Jr.,
are his

- individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy,
- open endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty,
- disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure
- and disclosure, encasement and rupture.

This also describes Morrison herself, who as “trickster author” invents
trickster like narrative forms to challenge, provoke, and engage her
audience in strengthening and renewing culture and community.

Based on the characteristics of the trickster narrative identified
above, it is possible to reread Morrison’s novels in this context in order to
find new insight into understanding the complexity of the issues—and
worldview she deals with. Her novels are suffused with trickster figures,
but the immediate concern here is to identify and interpret some of the
characteristics of the trickster narrative as employed by her, to emphasize
her conception of communal art that relates to African storytelling
traditions. Whether all her novels demonstrate the qualities of this
particular genre is debatable, but *Sula* and *Tar Baby* without doubt,
explicitly evoke the trickster tale’s most recognizable motifs, and
incorporate its thematic, structural, and functional concerns. In both these novels, Morrison is preoccupied with trickster characters that embody a central paradox in her work: that of maintaining and fostering ancestry and cultural identity in a changing historical situation, and at the same time, to rebel against the limitations and constraints set by conventions. “In her novels, the trickster—as character and as part of novel form—helps to preserve, define and defend community while constantly violating its confines.”

Sula: Paradoxical Tricksterism

In Sula, Morrison takes a common folk anecdote and weaves this into a novel that is centrally concerned with black communities struggling to define themselves against racism and institutionalized prejudice in post-bellum America. Familiar features of the traditional trickster folktales can be discovered in the structural use of the “nigger joke” tale in this novel. Like many folk stories that explain a cause, origin or reason for something—the story in Sula, gives an etiological explanation of how black Bottomites came to be at the “bottom of heaven” (S, p.6).

The nigger joke in Sula explains why the black neighbourhood, located on a hill overlooking the white town of Medallion, is called “the Bottom.” Bottom is actually founded on the hopes and aspirations of former slaves to regard America as their ‘homeland’ and thereby to create
a new African-American national identity. In that it stands for the power of dreams and a change from their oppressed and impoverished conditions of slavery, the "Bottom" lends itself more easily to the folkloristic tradition. Like the folktales of the oral tradition, the Bottom myth becomes the common property of the Black community, rather than the white; it is the product of a joint and communal authorship. And in conjunction with the spirit of this tradition, Morrison lends her voice to this collective authorship by transmitting to us her interpretation of the story, modified and altered, to enrich our understanding of the black community in *Sula*.

The Bottom thus begins, as "just a nigger joke," a way for the white man to cheat the black man. But beyond the joke, the myth inscribes a historical explanation for real-life socio-economic relationship of the two communities. Bottom represents a vision of reality that reveals white society's failed promises by racist politics, greed and semantic trickery in the way language is manipulated to maintain social control. However, the Bottom myth can be interpreted in different ways depending on whose perspective is being privileged. In fact, Morrison complicates the issue by playing on the idea that black people have the higher ground as long as they hold the higher moral ground. She
combines the affirmative influence of folklore with the subversive capacity of laughter and critique to suggest a form for cultural survival.

Of the joke, Morrison writes, it is "the kind coloured folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn’t come, or comes for weeks, and they’re looking for a little comfort somehow" (S, pp.4-5). Here, she illustrates the peculiar irony in black existence: by joking about lived indignities and fears, they extract laughter from their miserable experience and thereby find comfort somehow. This particular black brand of humour is not a laughing away of troubles, but an ability to see the ironic underside of something as well. Community jokers thus, express and diffuse the tension of living with existential pain, and the laughter is both self-deprecating and self-healing. This is an aspect of tricksterism that is both a conscious artistic technique and the result of an oppressive environment.

The double-edged irony inherent in the "nigger joke" lampoons both white oppressor and black joker. On one level, Morrison revises the traditional folklore in Sula, by making the trickster in her text not the black man (as was usually the case), but the white man who dupes and deceives the black slave using ambiguous language. Thus, the "nigger joke" is a joke played on "niggers," but it is also a joke played by "niggers" on the white man. Black Bottomites use humour not only to
withstand white people and misfortune but also to achieve some measure of respite from the base condition they have ended up in. Their “refusal to be de-humanized by the ‘nigger joke’ creates the ironic realization of the joker’s language.”67 The joke, when interpreted from their cultural viewpoint, is really a joke on their oppressors. By signifying on the white man’s invented “joke” through their own semantic trickery, the Black community celebrate themselves as culturally viable people, rather than as the downtrodden victims of racism and its discourses. This form of signifying is used by Morrison to constitute a discourse of resistance, which disrupts expectations and challenges the status quo, and at the same time affirm communal values.

In a novel of contrasts, ironic reversals, and mirror images reflected in the fates of her characters and their community, Bottom and Medallion, as top and bottom, generate an opposition that frames the story in Sula. The geography emphasizes the contending ideologies of the two communities: Medallion represents commerce, whereas Bottom, excluded from the economic benefits of the valley town, focuses on family and community. However, Bottom residents and valley people look to each other for the missing pieces of their respective lives. To the materialistically weary valley people, the Bottom community represents laughter, music and the simple joys of life. The longing of the valley
people blinds them to the pain of the Bottom residents, who struggle simply to survive: as outsiders to the Bottom, they cannot see the pain behind the laughter. Having no choice in their setting and divorced from the mainstream, the people of Bottom must create an identity and a purpose that involves a necessary identification with a culture that shuns them and a heritage that threatens to be erased. Thus, Morrison calls attention to the dividing line between insiders and outsiders and the importance of perspective and experience in informing what we know of the insider’s world. Through a trickster perspective that incorporates multiple perspectives, Morrison seeks to undermine absolute perspectives and fundamental definitions.

Thus, in *Sula*, the “valley man” would see the stereotypical colourfulness of the black community; hear the seemingly carefree music or enjoy the lively dancing, but would probably miss the “adult pain” that is in the subtext of the black experience. This emphasis on insider versus outsider knowledge and language is a component of the African-American vernacular tradition. The practice stems in part from a need in slavery times for slaves to put on a “face” or “mask” before the master to hide their pain behind a smile of smiles, to hide plans for insurrection behind a mask of subservience, or to use common speech as code words that mean other things that “outsiders” could not interpret. Music and
dance, humour and other folk survival mechanisms were just some of the ingenious methods black folks used to cope with the pain of men without work and of families living on the frayed edges of the prosperous white town below. “The ability to maintain culture at any level in the face of negation and erasure requires the trickster’s masking, maneuvering, signifying skills.”

Signifying is thus, “the language of trickery” that Gates identifies as the linguistic embodiment of the mask. Through structural and linguistic use of signifying as mask, Morrison examines the ironic truths inherent in the “nigger joke” that privilege illogicality, incongruitities, inconsistencies, and multiple points of view.

Morrison underlines the idea of the Bottom community as a character in search of an identity when she describes how the residents must understand “what they themselves were all about, tuck up there in the Bottom” (S, p.6). As she sees it, black life is artificial and pretentious when it tries to imitate social and cultural values that are different from their own. Through her Bottom/ Top (Medallion) concept of opposition, she demonstrates the different ideologies that characterize black and white life, and shows what happens when white social and cultural qualities are adopted by blacks. Thus, the twist in the “nigger joke” is further executed when the white community of Medallion now set their sights on the Bottom, and the black Bottomites influenced by the same
value system that generated Medallion, embrace a tunnel project as their way out of poverty but are symbolically and literally crushed by it. This calamity initiates the death of a community that eventually assimilates into Medallion. And Bottom and the valley, rather than melding and resolving the dialectic of their inhabitants’ lives, simply switch places in a circular fashion. Using the trickster’s masking techniques, Morrison is able “to define the position from which [she] views life, as well as the position from which [she] makes that life public.”

Morrison appropriates tricksterlike strategies for communicating the importance of community not only as theme but also as a means for structuring the narrative in *Sula*. In the novel, the racial barriers erected by the dominant group determine the outer boundary of the black community, and this is true of all Morrison’s fictional communities. To withstand the constant social pressures coming from outside, the black community must create a world within a world. The community provides a context for the story and a dwelling-place for the characters. In this mode, communities function in different and seemingly contradictory ways: negatively as models of conformity and positively as nurturing spaces which allow liberation. In this way, the community both supports and disparages the self-assertion of its members. In Morrison’s novels, the survival of the individual can take place only within the community.
Thus in *Sula*, no single individual is projected as the main character, not even Sula, after whom the novel is named. At the same time, Morrison provides the reader with specific details of the residents of Bottom, portraying them as highly individual personalities who acquire their individualism through interrelation with each other rather than through opposition to the group. Even Sula’s relevance to the novel’s structure is revealed only on the levels on which her behaviour and existence directly impinge on the community’s life. Her multiple trickster identity is “a reflection of community identity; when she absents herself from that community for 10 years, she ceases to exist within the text itself.”

When she dies, the novel does not end, but carries on for two chapters and more. At the same time, community is a cultural and social structure, which provides economic freedom for Sula to go out into the world. Her inheritance of Eva’s house leaves her with a place to call home no matter how far she travels. However, she must return to the community to complete her self-development. When she returns, Sula is critical of Nel for having become too conventional. A central paradox in Morrison’s work, that of maintaining cultural and community traditions while also wanting to break out of its confinements, is embodied here. The contextual role of community is the endorsement of models of conformity and for black women who transgress, the result is isolation. Sula rebels
and effectively indicts the negative impact of conformity on black women. Incidentally, the black community which demands conformity still does not reject its wayward members: exemplifying the trickster’s paradoxical, ambivalent relationship to the community. Despite their fear and judgment of Sula’s “evil,” they “let it run its course...” (S, pp.89-90) Even as a pariah, Sula performs an essential community role and contributes in upholding the community’s structure, just as a trickster does in the various tales. Her “evil” changed the women of the community in “accountable yet mysterious ways.” They began to treat their children better and cherish their husbands more, and in general, started behaving better than they had before. Thus, by violating societal norms, Sula paradoxically helps to define the Bottom community and to give them a secure sense of their own identities.

When Sula dies, the community regards it as a good omen: at first, her passing seems to herald good things. However, tricksterlike, once again things are not what they at first seem to be. Soon they begin to suffer in a number of ways, most of all in their moral resolve to live harmoniously to counter her ‘evil’ influence. Without her binding presence, “the tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. Without her mockery, affection for others sank into flaccid disrepair” (S, p.155). Her death becomes the prelude to the collapse of
Bottom and the death of a community that had defined itself against her iconoclasm.

In a novel where one seldom gets what one expects, it is appropriate that Morrison’s presentation of the moral categories of good and evil should challenge our conventional expectations. The townsfolk of Bottom categorize Sula as a villainess, a witch, a devil and a manifestation of the fourth face of God. But Sula is also paradoxically, a source of blessing, a catalyst for good in the society, “a heroine who has indirectly rendered some service to the community.”

Labels of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ become confused because as Morrison tells us, “one can never define good and evil. It depends on what uses you put it to. Evil is as useful as good is.” Thus, in *Sula* she questions the categories of good and evil by dramatizing the inadequacy of such categorizations.

As the novel reveals, *Sula* is centrally concerned with community and community making, with questions of right and wrong in human relationships in general, and bonds of friendships in particular, such as the one depicted between Sula and Nel. Morrison’s ambiguous treatment of constructed dichotomies between man and woman, black and white, good and bad, virgin and whore, creates a community that is at once a place of judgment and enforcer of conformity as well as a nurturing space for liberation and growth. The community in *Sula*, is therefore a character
to be interacted with, not a force to overcome. Like a character in a tale, it
is subject to development and even redemption. Such redemption can
occur even after more than 20 years of anger as Nel’s epiphany at the end
shows.

In such an ambiguous and uncertain situation, even the dialogue
that is set up among the characters is not a resolved one. A telling
example is given in the sickbed scene in which the two estranged friends,
Nel and Sula, finally meet and converse. Nel, who has always thought of
herself as being a “good woman,” feels morally superior to Sula, who she
feels has betrayed her. But when Sula asks a leaving Nel, “How you
know... About who was good. How you know it was you? [...] I mean
maybe it wasn’t you, maybe it was me.” (S, p.146), Nel has no reply.
Sula’s signifying on accepted meanings of “good” allows her to question
and destabilize Nel’s absolute and essentializing definition of herself.

On several levels, Morrison’s story seems to present more
questions than answers and make the greatest demands on our interpretive
and judging capabilities. By providing several competing perspectives,
Morrison’s tricksterlike narrative strategy undermines the stability or
authority of any single perspective. Rosier Smith asserts that the reader of
trickster novels “is anything but a passive, detached observer.” Readers
are forced to question their own readings, to hold their judgment in check,
and to continually revise it. They must negotiate each crossroad that they come upon, and make their choices according to their own illumination.

*Sula* ends in a circle that suggests endless repetition rather than closure:

It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and no top, just circles and circles of sorrow.” (S, p. 174)

Morrison’s open-ended or ambiguous ending, forces the reader to play a more active role in the construction of meaning. The ambiguity created by gaps and lack of closures allows the reader tricksterlike freedom to maneuver meaning and to interpret from different perspectives. In this regard, it would be more helpful to see the book within the context of African literary traditions, where Morrison’s trickster strategies replicate the structural techniques of trickster tales.

**Tar Baby: Competing Trickster Strategies**

Like *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* exemplifies Toni Morrison’s transformations of old folktales into entire novels that interpret the present African-American reality. The tar baby myth, on which the novel is based, is deeply entrenched in the African American trickster tradition. Like most African-American oral narratives, the tar baby myths originated in Africa as part of a cycle of trickster tales associated with Anaanu or Anansi, the cunning spider-man. These tales metamorphosed
into American-Negro fables told by the slaves in the Deep South and became part of the American vernacular tales of Brer Rabbit, (better known in African folktales as Hare, the animal trickster). The Brer Rabbit stories are a classic example of Trickster tales in which the trickster rabbit who gets the better of bigger and stronger animals becomes a metaphor for the Negro slave outwitting slave masters. The tar baby tale was included in folklorist Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*- an adaptation of a series of plantation tales.76

Different versions of the tar baby tale exist, although the plot elements remain essentially the same. In the Uncle Remus version, Brer Fox sets up a tar baby doll to catch Brer Rabbit while he watches from the bushes. The rabbit’s efforts to get the tar baby to respond to his queries get no result. Angry at the tar baby’s “stuck up” attitude, Brer Rabbit takes a swipe at it and ends up becoming stuck. In *Tar Baby*, Son Greene tells of white farmers and not Brer Fox, who place the tar baby on the road to entrap the rabbit. This version ends with Brer Rabbit escaping by outsmarting his captors—begging them to punish him in anyway except throw him into the briar patch, which the farmers do, not knowing that it is his home. Thus, the rabbit escapes.77

However, Morrison’s *Tar baby* is more than just a new rendition of Harris’s tale, which in any case, does not work as a completely consistent
analogue, despite some correspondences between the two. This is because Morrison’s intention is to get as close as possible to the original African myth without being influenced by Harris’s tale or any other “Westernized version of the story.” Instead, she prefers to depend on her own memory to recollect the “told story” of her childhood. This verbal emphasis on the telling of the story is Morrison’s response to what Madilyn Jablon describes as ‘the ethnological perspective embodied in Joel Chandler Harris’ approach to it,” and to signify on Harris’ attempts to establish the reliability of his own research over those based on the direct, personal experiences of the natives. In contrast, Morrison employing trickster strategies displaces Harris’ crediting of accuracy and objectivity to achieve authorial control, by emphasizing the crucial importance of improvisation in African-American storytelling traditions. She also challenges his attempts to privilege his version above others by incorporating different versions of the same tale, and by employing multiple perspectives and voices, as also by refusing to mediate with a clear authorial stance. Her approach, thus “suggests a view of the folktale as a dynamic, living entity, which responds to but is never fully controlled in the hands of its storytellers.”

Hence, like the storytellers of the oral traditions whose storytelling performances reflect their particular style, improvisational powers and
interpretive nuances, Morrison too, reconstructs and improvises, interprets and alters the “told story” of her childhood to suit her purpose. The novel offers a multiplicity of possible interpretations and Morrison’s treatment of the tar baby folktale motif is essentially multi-referential. What is important is not the replication of the tale but her revisional and reconstructive purpose in using the tale as an organizing principle for issues that are close to her heart. One of the most important of these issues is the problem of ancestry and cultural identity and the resulting conflicts within the black community. As a repository of cultural values, the tar baby folktale takes on great significance for Morrison as she examines ancestral relationships with folk culture as something that is both necessary and extremely problematic in a changing historical situation. As a trickster novel, *Tar Baby* expresses the contemporary condition of the African American community: the split she sees in this community is conveyed through the splitting of her trickster protagonists in the novel. The conflict between Son and Jadine takes on cultural and gender significance when viewed through their associations with the qualities of tar and the tar baby motif. Hence, it is crucial to view these trickster characters as rhetorical and structural principles that shape her narrative structure in this novel. At the same time, by employing trickster strategies, Morrison’s revisionist mythmaking paves the way for the
reinvention of new narrative forms that can challenge prescribed gender roles and transform culture.

By incorporating the story of the trickster Rabbit, Morrison reveals an important factor in African American cultural identity. As Jeanne Rosier Smith explains, “Because the American slave system involved living with whites in daily power-based relationships, African American trickster tales strongly reflect the necessity for the trickster’s subversive, masking, signifying skills.” 81 Despite his controversial reputation in black folklore, as being sneaky and cunning, Br’er Rabbit’s wit, ingenuity, and resourcefulness that aid him in surviving any situation, account for his universal appeal. Linden Peach argues that in Westernized versions like Joel Chandler Harris’s, Br’er Rabbit is “drained of his guile and the story itself becomes an example of how white culture identified Negroes with animals, in turn reconciling the inhuman treatment of black people with the ‘whites’ apparent Christian and democratic principles.” 82 For Morrison, the value of this trickster lies in his paradoxical role as a breaker of social taboos, and transgressor of boundaries, yet defining culture and teaching survival.

In *Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison restores Br’er Rabbit to his place as a black cultural hero in the person of Son, who is both trickster and survivor like the fabled rabbit. “Anarchic, wandering” (*TB*, p.143), one of
Morrison’s free men, Son has several identities and alibis, and we are never sure of his real name. “He is Ulysees waylaid on his way home by the water lady (TB, p.2-3), who, as Circe, Aphrodite, and Erzulie all in one, leads him to the Isle de Chevaliers to fulfill his role as mythic horseman.” His presence in the Valerian household is disruptive and disturbing. He literally and metaphorically becomes the proverbial skeleton in the Street’s closet, forcing each of the major characters to reveal and confront his or her crimes and deceptions. In this regard, Morrison’s comment that the tar baby tale is also about masks holds true: “Not masks as covering what is hidden, but how masks come to life, take life over, exercise tensions between itself and what it covers.” All the major characters are shown to be living the masks they have assumed through most of their lives. Son, as the lowly outsider is, however, powerful enough to transform and reconstitute the inside because, as Morrison says, his “most effective mask, is none.” Assuming the perspective of a masking trickster, Son precipitates the unmasking of all the characters, particularly, Valerian and Jadine, a point that draws attention to Morrison’s trickster masking techniques as narrative strategy.

For this purpose, Morrison replaces Harris’s narrator, Uncle Remus, who is a mere stereotype of the obedient and faithful Negro slave. Her narrator tells the story in a voice that is not stereotyped in any way—
a contemporary African-American voice speaking to a contemporary audience. At times, it assumes the voice of an omniscient, god-like being that can see into people’s dreams and tell what the trees, birds, and rivers think and say. Son, who as trickster embodies the trickster perspective, approximates “the narrator’s fluid, constantly shifting perspective with his free and easy movement among the worlds of all the other characters...”86 Through Son’s signifying skills, Morrison is able to appropriate tricksterlike freedom to signify on accepted meanings and perspectives.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison uses the myth’s paradoxical inferences to explore the relationship of Jadine Childs, a Sorbonne educated, light-skinned African-American model and Son Greene, a dark-skinned fugitive on the run for killing his wife. It is not difficult to see why many critics endorse Jadine as the Europeanized decoy fashioned by the white oppressor Valerian Street (who pays for her education and influences her values and lifestyle) in order to trap the innocent Son who is representative of the black race. On one level, Son appears to be the Brer Rabbit figure of the myth, a trickster who lives by his wits and steals food (Valerian’s) to survive like his fabled counterpart. Jadine, the “tar baby side-of-the-road whore tramp” (*TB*, p.189), who tries to supplant the cultural pride he is rooted in with alien white views and values, endangers
Son. At first, Son believes he can change her, that he can tear “her mind away from that blinding awe” of Valerian’s world (TB, p.189). He attempts “to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency” (TB, p.102), and to bring her back to Eloie and the history it stands for. But like the tar baby of Harris’s account, she resists his efforts to do so. Instead, Son’s attempts to establish a relationship with Jadine lead to his extreme frustration: he even hits her once like Brer Rabbit who hit the tar baby only to become stuck to it. Similarly, the more entangled Son gets with Jadine, the more he risks being destroyed. Finally, he finds himself surrendering his dreams of Eloie with its welcoming women and ladies minding the pie table and is, instead, willing to settle for “whatever she (Jadine) wants” (TB, p. 275).

However, the situation in Tar Baby is a much trickier and complicated one than the above account suggests, for Morrison’s ultimate aim is to illustrate the trickster’s community and culture-shaping capacity. She draws on the interplay between the oppositional characterization of Jadine and Son and the multiple interpretations that the roles of the tricksters, the tar baby and the victim offer to deconstruct and subvert the racial and gender stereotyping of both men and women. Through her variations of the tar baby story in the novel Son and Jadine exchange the mythical roles. Son is not the only trickster, Jadine is one
too, and both of them are each other’s tar babies. As one critic comments, "The Tar Baby tale as a metaphor of entrapment has one meaning for Jadine and another for Son." While Jadine is in her element in New York, Son feels depressed and entrapped. Similarly, Son’s hometown of Eloe, which functions as his briar patch, is boring and stifling to Jadine. Although Son tries to make Jadine acknowledge her colour and her folk roots in the South, Jadine refuses to accept the role of minding the pie table in the church basement. Likewise, Son resists all Jadine’s efforts to reform him so that they can have a life together on her terms.

The conflict is between assimilation and cultural nationalism, between ethnicity and feminism. Morrison explores the implications of black women’s objections to community, and societal roles traditionally expected of them, while at the same time foregrounding issues of cultural preservation and rootedness. Her focus on trickster strategies thus stems from a central paradox in Morrison’s work—her preoccupation with combating racial and sexual oppression while affirming cultural identity and tradition. The value of the trickster is his/her variability and rule breaking, which define and maintain culture. Her two main trickster protagonists in the novel represent this dilemma between tradition (represented by Son, the ‘swamp women,’ and ‘night women’) and the
urge to rebel against its restrictions (represented by Jadine). She defines the dilemma thus:

“One had a past, the other had 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?” (TB p.232)

Although Morrison gives credence to both perspectives, she offers no easy solution to bridge the gap. Her standpoint is that the ideological or social conflicts embodied in the Son/Jadine relationship cannot be solved by applying a formulaic value to folklore. As in the dilemma tale, she only presents the conflicts, and the limits of each opposing perspectives, leaving the rest for her readers to resolve. At the same time, she questions arbitrarily chosen, totalizing views, which are exclusionary and which simplify reality.

Morrison’s differentiation of what the tar baby means in the westernized versions, and what it means in the original African context further complicates her approach to the tar baby myth. Her examination of tar and its connotations in relation to Jadine enables her to project Jadine as both tar baby and trickster. She explains that Jadine’s tragedy “was not that she was a Tar Baby, but that she wasn’t.” Referring to her discovery of a “tar lady in African mythology,” Morrison, tricksterlike, attributes a new meaning to the term “tar” as having sacred qualities.

Karen Baker-Fletcher cites the symbolism of the tar as a “shiny,
powerful,“ and holy substance with the ability to hold things together, and hence, the term functions as a metaphor of black women’s cohesive power. In this sense, Jadine does not belong to this group of black women symbolically represented in the novel by the mythical tree women.

In a key scene, Jadine literally falls into the tar pit. Her struggle to escape from the suffocating confines of the sticky tar symbolically reflects her identity crisis regarding racial identification and gender roles. This draws attention to the fact that tar's positive culture-binding properties are lost on Jadine. Instead, her struggles to escape evoke tar's negative, restrictive limitations on the trickster’s freedom of movement. In this, she embodies the newly emerging feminism in black women who value their own subjectivity over fixed definitions of womanhood. Although, Morrison holds tar’s sacred values of cohesiveness and culture-building qualities in high esteem, she also respects Jadine’s urge to escape and reinvent herself. Thus, in a crucial revision of the traditional tar baby tale, she is not rescued by the rabbit (Son), or by the white farmer (Valerian). Instead, she drags herself out. From this moment, she embodies not just the tar baby but also the trickster who can escape from virtually any situation. Crucial too, is our recognition of the tricksterlike technique that Morrison executes here to achieve this feat by signifying
on the word ‘tar.’ “By radically questioning [the] restrictive view of the
tar baby, and by complicating the meaning of tar itself, Morrison makes
an essentialized view of Jadine, or any character, extremely difficult.”

Jadine’s turning point is her rejection of Son’s dreams of Eloë, in
which she distinguishes an attitude of suppression towards women. Son
Greene as trickster is the symbol of cultural survival, but at the same
time, Morrison questions the sexism of her male tricksters. In this regard,
*Tar Baby* critiques the choices available to black American women.
Jadine’s surrogate mother, Ondine, belatedly tries to teach Jadine lessons
of daughterhood by telling her,

> A girl has got to be a daughter first...If she never learns how
to be a daughter, she can’t never learn how to be a
woman....You don’t need your own natural mother to be a
daughter...A daughter is a woman that care about where she
come from and takes care of them that took care of her. (*TB*,
p.283)

But Jadine rejects the role of mother, and daughter in the traditional
mould, and voices a counter perspective to this role:

> There are other ways to be a woman.... Your way is one, I
guess.... But it’s not my way.... I don’t want to learn to be
the kind of woman you’re talking about because I don’t want
to be that kind of woman. (*TB*, p.284)

She recognizes the trap of Eloë, so chooses Europe and the making of
herself. She does not have her “ancient properties,” but she is determined
to survive on her own terms. The tricksterlike survival quality that she
embodies has usually been granted to male tricksters, but not to women, which explains why, as Trudier Harris says, it is “easy to be unsympathetic to Jadine:”

African American folk culture has not prepared us well for a female outlaw, or for a beauty queen with traits of an outlaw...: Women who dare assert individualistic values over communal ones are summarily put in their places. Men who follow individualistic paths are deemed heroic.  

Morrison allows Jadine the black male’s freedom to take flight, literally and metaphorically. In doing so, she critiques the stereotyping of racial and gender roles and the different standards applied to male and female tricksters: by refusing to be a victim Jadine forfeits the sympathy victims usually elicit, thus refuting stereotyping. But as Morrison often stresses, freedom goes with the necessity of being responsible for one’s choices. “Men and women, this trickster text argues, are equally free to experiment with personal identity and equally responsible for preserving culture.”

To offset the limitedness of such perceptions toward her female tricksters as represented by Jadine, Morrison introduces another female trickster in the character of the blind Therese, an ancestral figure on the Isle de Chevaliers who is gifted with second sight. Therese is also associated with the tar women by virtue of her “magic breasts” and as such, exemplifies a different aspect of trickster behaviour available to
women. Although Morrison also indicts Therese’s willed blindness to whites as a form of limitation, she nevertheless validates the “discredited knowledge” of folklore and myth that Therese represents. Therese knows that Jadine is lost, having forgotten her “ancient properties” (TB, p.263). Her role, as trickster, is to present to Son, whom she identifies as one of the blind horsemen, a choice of joining the mythic horsemen or to go back to Jadine. Reminding us of the trickster’s ability to dwell at crossroads and thresholds, Therese has access to the mythic world. Her final trick of landing Son on the far side of the island leaves him with a choice and “changes what seemed a prescribed, choiceless situation to produce dialogue, ambiguity, and chance.”

Son appears to embark on a journey that is a rebirth of sorts, but as is often the case in Morrison’s novels, considerable doubt exists as to whether or not Son will be able to reacquaint himself with his “ancient properties. Does the sound of the blind horsemen or of the rabbit’s, “Lickity-Split,” signify Son’s freedom in the end, or is his survival possible only in the realms of myth? And as for Jadine, has she given up the soul of a black folk culture she never knew, one, which Son romanticized, to survive? Ultimately for her, “the same sixteen answers to the question What went wrong? kicked like a chorus line. Having sixteen answers meant having none. So none it was. Zero.” (TB, p.250)
Unlike the other chapters of the book, the last one is unnumbered, suggesting both the absence of answers and their multiplicity.

The novel’s ending is a testimony to Morrison’s success as the ultimate trickster. By ending so ambiguously, she recalls the trickster’s multivalence and elusiveness. Readers’ expectations are disrupted and unsettled but they remain involved because of her trickster’s emphasis on participation and transaction. The blank page at the beginning of the chapter is an invitation that gives the reader the freedom to enter the book and become part of the creative process of the story. Her incorporation of different and alternative worldviews and perspectives, including author, narrator, characters, and readers, reveal an awareness of multiple levels of reality, of ‘other’ worlds, that undermine the plausibility of any single point of view. Following the narrator’s wandering, meandering viewpoint, the reader travels back and forth between fragmented segments, and is thus forced to negotiate with all perspectives to establish connections. Morrison’s point is that given a more complete perspective of alternative realities, individuals can release themselves from their own limited vision and open up to creative solutions. She provides her characters and readers with that missing information by way of the supernatural, although their ability to interpret it adequately is open to debate. In keeping with the trickster tale tradition in which tales are
always "to be continued," Morrison sets up her readers to ponder over their crucial roles in recreating the story and constructing meanings in a multifaceted world of ever shifting meanings, boundaries and perspectives.

Epigraphs:


•• Temsula Ao, "The Old Story-teller" from *Songs From The Other Life* (Grasswork Books: Grasswork Development Services, Pune, 2007), p.12.

Endnotes

1 Gay Wilentz in *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and in the Diaspora* defines "oraliterature" as "written creative works which retain elements of the orature that informed them." (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), xvii.


3 A few of the critics who have examined Morrison’s employment of the folktale and other aspects of African and African-American rhetorical strategies are Vashti, "African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula,*" in Braxton and McLaughlin, *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afro-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance*, (London: Serpent’s


8 Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p.169.


11 Morrison intentionally kept Pecola from any first person narration of the story because she wanted to “try show a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her,” (Bakeman, p.59). Also, such a
character would be an unreliable narrator, unwilling (or unable) to tell the actual circumstances of that year. (Stepto, p.479)


13 Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p.170.

14 Henceforth, *The Bluest Eye* will be cited parenthetically as *BE*, *Sula* as *S*, *Song of Solomon* as *SoS*, *Beloved* as *B*, *Tar Baby* as *TB*, *Jazz* as *J*, and *Paradise* as *P*.


17 Kuenz, p.429.


19 In *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* (1977), linguist Geneva Smitherman defines this oral tradition as “a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared” (p.58). She further states that to testify is “to tell the truth through story” (p.150). Claudia’s testimony is thus not only a commentary but also a “communal re-enactment of her feelings and experiences” (p.150).


23 Ibid.

24 Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p.176


26 Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p. 169.


30 Valerie Smith, p.136,

31 Wilentz, p.84.

32 Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p. 170

33 Gael Bryan, "'Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone': The Semiotics of Death, Mourning, and Closural Practice in Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon" *MELUS*, (Fall, 1999).
Cited after: http://www.finarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2278/is_3_24/ai_62350902.

4 of 12 pages.

34 Opoku-Agyemang & Asempasah, p. 170


37 Skerrett Jr., p.201.


40 Wilentz, p.98.


44 Akoma, p.7
Ibid.


See Philip Page, “Furrowing,” p.646.


Akoma, p.176.


Cf. A.J. Verdelle, 3.


Ibid, p.54.

Rosier Smith, p. 115.

Ibid, p.3.


Rosier Smith, p.112.

Byerman, p.193.

Toni Morrison often speaks of the “other” in a way suggesting that the outsider can have at best limited access to her books. She has proclaimed, “From my perspective, there are only black people,” and “I write ... for my people” (LeClair, p.124, and p.120). However, in *Sula,* she chose to make the preface a “door” through which she could lead the (white) “valley Man” into the African-American world of the hillside Bottom. Morrison would later, “despise” this application of the strategy, (“Unspeakable,” p.24) that she had hitherto objected in the writings of black male writers such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin who wrote to explain and justify the black life.

Rosier Smith, p. 143.

Cf. *Signifying Monkey,* p.54.

Rosier Smith, p. 144.


77 For a fuller discussion of the various versions of this tale, see Harris’s *Folklore and Fiction*.


80 Rosier Smith, p. 127.

81 Ibid, p.113

82 Peach, *Toni Morrison*, p.80.


85 Ibid.

86 Rosier Smith, p. 145.


Rosier Smith, p. 133.

Trudier Harris, p. 128.

Rosier Smith, p.115.


Rosier Smith, p.140.

In an interview with Nellie Mckay, Morrison says that maybe Eloe “wasn’t real anyway...He did not live in that world either. Maybe there was just a little bit of fraud in his thinking as he did [sic] since he was away. So you can’t really trust all that he says.” (p.405).