CHAPTER – II

THEMATIC PERSPECTIVES OF

TONI MORRISON’S NOVELS

My analyses of Toni Morrison’s novels are grounded in her depiction of the themes of alienation and affirmation. Yet her novels demonstrate a different kind of thematic perspective than many American readers are accustomed to. Morrison’s work consistently shows that identity and place are found in the community and in the communal experience, and not in the transcendence of society or in the search for a single, private self.

Morrison’s first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), opens with a sample of the idyllic “Dick and Jane” primer. The primer acts as an ironic frame for the entire novel’s narrative; its sanitized image pervades all of American society – from schoolbooks to print and electronic media – as the standard for family behavior and beauty:

*Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow*-


meow. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See
Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with
Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh, Mother,
laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you
play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile.
See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play
with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look.
Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They
will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.¹

This primer prose is immediately repeated two more times a
second time it is printed at a more accelerated speed, the words
running together without punctuation:

Here is the house it is green and white is has a red door
it is very pretty here is the family mother dick and jane
live in the green and white house they are very see Jane
she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with
jane.²

The reader is confronted with this dizzying visual impression
and compelled to mediate between the familiar simplicity of the
childhood version and the chaos of second and third versions. Each
chapter is prefaced by fragments of the frenzied prose in order to
continually remind the reader of class myth and the tragic desolation of the novel’s central character, Pecola Breedlove and her family, who are incapable of attaining this dream myth.

But as we continue to read, the initial presence of the children’s prose also assumes further significance as a guidepost to the novel’s complex structure. Embedded within the prose are the novel’s the personal, idealized consciousness of childhood, as demonstrated by Pecola’s yearning for blue eyes the second represent the less sedate, less naïve consciousness of the novel’s central narrator, Claudia MacTeer, who, as an adult, recalls the ambivalence that the idyllic prose’s image creates the third version provides the social/historical consciousness of an objective narrator who, by repeating the prose and exposing the contrast between the idea and the real, offer the reader no escape from her anger at the dissolution of black lives.

In the first chapter, Claudia’s narrative retrospective of her childhood describes a world where adults do not talk to us they give us direction. They issue orders without providing information. We are immersed in Claudia’s reckoning of her childhood: we see through the eyes of a child, but it is not nor can it be a fully accurate account. Her reminiscences are split between a child’s
and an adult’s viewpoint, and thus she Vacillated form a personal subjectivity to an objective recognition that serves to emphasize the difficulty in sorting through her feeling for herself her friend, for her world around her. And for what those feelings and impressions meant then and now.

Claudia’s adult voice asks herself as she recalls her mother’s extreme anger at her catching a cold. Or perhaps did her mother’s anger mask a deeper concern and love for her. Claudia’s modulating voice requires the reader to answer these and other questions that elude her; but, as we shall see, the answers cannot be nor should they be arrived at easily or concretely, and the complexity of the novel’s narrative consciousness contributes to this indeterminacy.

Barbara Christian comments, in her “A Promise Song,” that Pecola’s story does not follow the usual mythic cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, from planting to harvest to planting. Hers will proceed from pathos to tragedy and finally madness. Neither are we given a linear structure wherein the novel begins at the beginning. Instead, the first section, “Autumn,” tells us the whole of Pecola’s story and a portion of Claudia’s on the introductory page, as Claudia makes
the analogy to her and her sister Frieda’s failed planting of marigold seeds:

We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove (Pecola’s father) is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too.³

Claudia makes it clear at the outset that she now knows as an adult that she cannot valorize a particular emotion, she will only take refuge in how Pecola’s tragedy and madness have come to be. And so she implicitly asks the reader to suspend the certitude of value judgments and for good reason. Linear order and mythic coherency provide illusionary moments in the narratives of life, in nature, as well as in fiction. Neither in life nor in nature can we consistently take comfort in certitude; both can be uncompromising and unpredictable, both will defy the narrative illusions, those moments of innocence and faith that we create for them.
Pecola’s initial appearance signals a shift to a more coherent narration, although still told by Claudia with the subjective naivete of a child. We come to know Pecola’s idealized consciousness, and significantly we learn of her object of desire and the symbolic perpetrator for the central conflict and incongruity in the novel:

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Frieda and (Pecola) had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was.4

Like the Dick and Jane primer, Frieda and especially Pecola are attracted to the order and perfection of this manufactured image; it is an image that connotes myriad, contrived values including how a girl and/or woman should look, act, and even feel.

Considering Pecola’s pathetic circumstances, it is understandable perhaps that she be drawn to an idealized fabrication, and as readers, we fully sympathize with Pecola when she is scolded by Mrs. MacTeer for drinking three quarts of milk in one day. Claudia says that Pecola took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face. But her
extreme fondness for the cup also represents an indictment against the whole of a value system that has afflicted not only Pecola and her family, but an entire community. Both Frieda and Claudia, whose parents, unlike Pecola’s, have provided a relatively loving and stable family environment, are themselves drawn to what Shirley Temple represents.

There is a gentle irony in Claudia’s ambivalent “adjustment.” As a child, she cannot fully know the locus for her conversion; she changes for the sake of unfettered love; she, as Susan Willis puts it, perceives the world prior to the advent of capitalism and bourgeois society. But in the duality of both partial recognition and later submergence, Claudia establishes for herself and for the reader an empathic link to Pecola’s extreme seduction, and thus for the remainder of the novel, Claudia’s sometimes child, sometimes adult voice attempts to make sense of an entire community’s fragmentation. To further open out Claudia’s wavering perceptions and to delineate the social milieu surrounding her narrative of Pecola and the Breedlove family, Morrison offers in the remaining chapters a distanced narration that serves to answer why a cultural reification occurred in the community.
The Breedlove family lives in an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. The narrator’s sparse and subdued description of the Breedlove home is analogous to the emptiness and despair of their domestic life, particularly in the almost anthropomorphic characterization of their furniture:

*The furniture has aged without ever having become familiar. People had owned it, but never known it. No one had lost a penny or a brooch under the cushions of either sofa .. No one had given birth in one of the beds or remembered with fondness the peeled paint places . . . No young girl had stared at the tiny artificial Christmas tree and remembered when she had decorated it, or wondered if that blue ball was going to hold, or if HE would ever come back to see it.*

*There were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished.*

Unlike the seeming stability of the MacTeer household, the Breedlove furniture reflects the emotional stasis in their lives; they live a futile, makeshift existence, rootless, and devoid of affirmative values or traditions. And like a kind of spatial blues, even the
dialogue—a call and response between Cholly and a delivery man about a defective sofa accentuates their futile and oppressive existence:

“Looka here, buddy. It was OK when I put it on the truck. The store can’t do anything about it once it’s on the truck.”

“But I don’t want no tore couch if n it’s bought new.”

“Tough shit, buddy. Your tough shit . . .”6

The Breedloves are victims of a racist, class conscious society that has forced them to live unnatural lives; but while their lives have been battered by racism’s more tangible effects of extreme poverty and deprivation, the most insidious effects of racism as well as sexism are represented by the maliciousness of stereotypes. Claudia explains that although the Breedloves poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique, but their ugliness was unique. And it is unique because the Breedloves have fully internalized their ugliness; Claudia remembers that it was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. Their all-knowing master is, of course, a dominant
culture that has pervasively imposed their white, male-engendered stereotypes upon them; as Claudia continues:

The master has said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked at themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance, “Yes”, they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as mantle over them, and went about the world with it.7

But while the tragedy of Pecola and her family results in their loss of self-worth, it more significantly becomes the catalyst for the abuse and violence that the family inflicts upon them, as Claudia continues:

The master has said that you are ugly people. They had looked at themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. Yes, they had said that you are right. And they took the ugliness in their hands threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.

But while the tragedy of Pecola and her family results in their loss of self-worth, it more significantly becomes the catalyst for the
abuse and violence that the family inflicts upon each other and that is further inflicted upon them by a community who themselves are caught up in the same futile cycle of desire and denigration.

We are introduced to this pattern of infliction in what appears to be a typical morning scene in the Breedlove household. Pauline cajoles her sleeping, drunken husband into getting coal and lighting their cold stove. His recalcitrant response precipitates a violent argument between them replete with punching, kicking, and screaming. The narrator comments that these “quarrels” give substance to their lives. Their mutual abuse is reminiscent of scenes from earlier black novels such as Bigger’s murder of his girlfriend, Bessie, in Native Son or Lutie’s self-defensive murder of Boots in Ann Petry’s The Street. And indeed, like those novels, the closeness between Cholly and Pauline necessitates that they abuse one another in an attempt to displace their pent-up, inarticulated fury toward a hostile world; and thus they become mutual scapegoats who assuage their inadequacies by assuming positions of tenuous dominance.

But Morrison is not intent upon merely affirming the existence of the fear, frustration, and fury inherent in black life; she wishes to expose the psychic causes for the social distortions
within a black community. To do so, Morrison has chosen Pecola as her thematic representative; but in other seemingly unrelated episodes and scenes about various members of the community, she reminds but one product of a larger, more complex, more diffused social and herstorical schema.

Perhaps the most significant portion of *The Bluest Eyes* is Pauline Breedlove’s chapter. Encompassed in Polly’s life is the whole of the Northern community’s alienation and dissonance. And since her story is told in the voice of a distanced narrator as well as in the voice of Pauline’s own dialect, we are privy to both her way of perceiving her world in its distinctive colors and images and to a narrator’s expansion upon what Pauline, in her subjective position, is incapable of understanding. From her beginnings in Alabama and later in Kentucky, Pauline has been plagued by a crooked, archless foot that flops when she walks. Like the deformities of Sherwood Anderson’s small town grotesques, Pauline’s physical deformity unworthiness. And yet like the Winesburg, Ohio characters, she possesses a sensitive nature which compels to her to long for consistency and purpose in her life:

*Restricted, as a child, to this cocoon of her family’s spinning, she cultivated quiet and private pleasures. She*
liked, most of all, to arrange things. To line things up in rows—jars on shelves at canning, peach pits on the step, sticks, stones, leaves. . . she missed—without knowing what she missed—paints and crayons.²

In one way, Pecola, in her madness, has triumphed over her condition; the community, by contrast remains in a static state of denial and dissonance. However, Pecola’s sacrificial position in the novel also has a more hopeful purpose Claudia has survived to tell her and Pecola’s story; she has testified to the unnaturalness of black life; and as a consequence, she recognizes in retrospect that she and the community have failed Pecola. For Pecola, as Claudia says, it’s much, much, much too late. But it is implicit in this sorrowful recognition that Claudia’s story serves as a point of departure in her own search for an authenticating self.

Unlike the multi-layered, segmented narrative of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s second novel, *Sula* (1973), employs a third-person narrative that unfolds in a seemingly chronological manner. It begins in the year 1919 and proceeds with chapter’s titles “1920,” “1922,” “1927,” “1937,” and so on to the year “1965.” But each chapter does not cover an entire year. Instead, each represents a particular event around which revolves its past, present and future
significance. Thus are narrative unfolds like a firmly interwoven oral folktale wherein time merely provides the focus for the event themselves while the past, present and future collapse into a kind of synchronic action.

The setting in Sula is an isolated neighborhood called “The Bottom”, but it is a neighborhood of a recent historical past, and therefore “The Bottom” and its inhabitants assume, like the narrative itself, a mythological quality. They and their environment appear drawn from the rich tradition of black folktale and legend, which also server another purpose: Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, the inhabitants of “The Bottom” are not often prey to the extreme seduction of a dominant culture. Instead they are presented as having a world of their own, and thus the delimiting of an external gaze and the valorization of black values and traditions further emphasize Morrison’s singular concern for black life.

The novel begins with the end do “The Bottom” – a neighborhood once isolated form and eventually destroyed by white progress in Medallion City, Ohio. In the narrator’s retrospective account, we are given an Eatonville-like description where you might have seen a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, bit of black bottom, a bit of ‘messing around’ to the lively
notes of a mouth organ. But this tranquil remembrance belies a contradictor undercurrent in the neighborhood because beyond the laughter of the people messing around, there remain the adult pain that rests somewhere under their eyelids.

We have entered another black world of contradiction and inverted truth, for as the story leaps form end to beginning; we learn that “The Bottom” is not situated in the fertile bottomland of the valley but in the cold, barren hills. The naming of the neighborhood itself has influenced and affixed a reality upon “The Bottom. A slave master had bequeathed “The Bottom” to his newly freed slave, who was hoodwinked into believing it was the bottom land of heaven. Thus its present inhabitants have come to think of it as a joke, a nigger joke. They can think of it in no other way because, for them, laughter is one way of dealing with their pain. People here endure, and do so because and at the behest of their environment, where planting is backbreaking, where the soil slides down and washes away the seeds, and where the wind lingers all through the winter. This need to endure, to survive, then, compels the people of “The Bottom” to value consistency and control as yet another way of dealing with contradiction and privation. How they maintain this communal mind-set is the subject of the first
chapter, “1919,” and sets the stage for the novel’s dialectical tension.

National Suicide Day encapsulates the central ordering principle around which the people of “The Bottom” conduct their live. Begun by Shadrack, a shell-shocked WWI veteran, National Suicide Day is a simple ritual performed each January Third wherein Shadrack parades through the Bottom with a cowbell and a hangman’s rope calling the people together. In a brief flashback, we learn of Shadrack’s horrific war experience and his two-year stay in a hospital mental ward. Shadrack returns to Medallion mentally ravaged, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t even know who or what he was with no past, no language, no tribe, no source. In the chaos of war, Shadrack senses his own nothingness; and he seeks refuge in National Suicide Day as a way of controlling his fear of death:

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\text{It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year were devoted to it,}
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everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free.⁹

To survive any inconvenience, which is indeed their ultimate aim, the people of “The Bottom” seek to identify and define any evil or aberration in order to lessen their vulnerabilities of being both human and black. With recognition comes a position of passive resistance and/or absorption of any aberration into the essential fabric of their lives:

In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precaution must naturally be taken be protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfill itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people.¹⁰

In keeping with this position of passive resistance and absorption, the people of “The Bottom” organize their lives around National Suicide Day so that weddings are never held on January Third, simple coincidences are attributed to it, and even Reverend Deal takes it up, saying the same folk who have sense enough to
avoid Shadrack’s call are the ones who insist on drinking themselves to death or womanizing themselves to death.” Their integral response, which easily, quietly becomes a part of the fabric of their lives, reproduces the long and weighty African-American tradition of call and response.

In each subsequent chapter of *Sula*, the neighborhood’s response to Shadrack’s call of death is replicated both in the public and private realms. Like National Suicide Day, the characters and events presented in each chapter revolve around an individual specter of death. But as we have already seen, this specter of death assumes an inverted quality in “The Bottom.” Rather than creating a potentially liberating synthesis, Shadrack’s call becomes another guidepost for survival and continuity. Thus, in its version of call and response, the neighborhood “fixes” rather than improvises upon the call in spite and because of the instability of Nature, Time, and most of all, the unexpectedness of Death.

In chapter “1922,” two scenes underscore Sula’s indeterminacy and serve to determine the direction of Helen’s remaining life. Both Nel and Sula are intent upon adventuresomeness. But it is Sula who instigates such adventure. For example Sula convinces Nel to take the shortest way home in
anticipation of meeting of four white boys who have been harassing black schoolchildren, including Nel. In their encounter, Sula pulls a knife, which makes the boys stop short and proceeds to slash off only the tip of her finger. In her effort to protect Nel, Sula assumes the role of active victim while appearing recklessly indifferent. Nel, in her passivity, can only look at Sula’s face which seems miles and miles away.

The second and more unsettling scene involves the death of young child. A good part of chapter “1922” details the two twelve-year-old girls budding interest in the neighborhood’s beautiful black boys. But like many of the novel’s chapters, what begins as self-discovery ends in frustration and constriction of expectations, which are symbolized through death or betrayal. Toward the close of the chapter, the girls meet Chicken Little by the river bank and again Sula plays an active and purposeful role by helping the elated, small boy to climb a tree. After they descend from the tree, Sula continues her playfulness by picking up Chicken by his hands and swinging him around and around until she accidentally loses her grip and the boy sails into the river. Both girls watch helplessly as Chicken Little drowns. Nel believes that Somebody saw, and
since Shadrack’s isolated cabin is the only one near, Sula, the activist, runs to ask him.

With Shadrack absent, Sula enters his home and is surprised by its neatness and order. Her childhood fear of the terrible Shad is dispelled and when she turns to see him in the doorway, he punctuates the frustration of expectations that surround the text by simply saying, "Always". His intention as he believes many years later is to convince her, assure her of permanency. Shadrack has not seen the accident, and thus his vision of controlling death remains intact. He has, however, had a visitor to his lonely home which will have a great influence upon his later life and upon the entire neighborhood. But at the moment of their encounter, Sula misreads Shadrack’s always, believing it to be linked to what she begins to see as the constant untrustworthiness of human experience.

Later in the novel, Sula, as an adult, re-sees her active childhood and provides an explanation for her actions. She has carried with her the recognition that the one time she tried to protect Nel, earned not Nel’s gratitude but her disgust. This incident and her remembrance, coupled with the death of Chicken Little and the recognition of her mother’s dislike for her, have
taught her that there was no self to count on either. But Sula’s explanation is, of course, withheld from the reader, from Nel, and from the neighborhood so that for much of the novel, we feel torn and nonplussed about Sula; we waver in our perceptions of her which is symbolically reinforced by the birthmark on her face. At various times throughout the novel, it is made analogous to a tadpole by Shadrack, a copperhead snake by Nel’s husband, Jude, a stemmed rose by Nel, and a frightening black thing by Nel’s children.

Like her birthmark, Sula becomes the center of ambivalence in the novel that both attracts and repels us perhaps because, as Banyiwa-Horne contends, Sula is an exploration of that dimension of the feminine psyche or self which is often hidden from view because it is scary and too problematic to deal with. Banyiwa-Horne goes on to say that this scary self exists in all women and, for that matter, in all human beings and it specifically seeks to break count on Sula seeks and alternative self is as the narrator says,

... completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments no ego. for that
reason she (feels) no compulsion to verify herself be consistent with herself.\textsuperscript{11}

Sula’s reactionary realization create a fissure between Sula and Nel which points to the inherent contradiction in their call and response synthesis. While Sula reacts to Chicken Little’s unanticipated death with her own kind of free-fall away from social and emotional expectations, Nel retreats to the safety of the familiar fixed principles of the Bottom. The divergent paths of the two women offer two perspectives on communal reality. Nel responds to Chicken’s death much as the community might do with what she later realizes as a calm, controlled behavior. As a product of her upbringing, she, like her mother assumes the controlling response attributable to National Suicide Day as she demystifies inconstancy by re-initiating her white, middle class values. Four years later she chooses to marry a local boy, Jude, and she sublimes her me-ness for the certitude of marriage because, as she thinks that greater than her friendship with Sula is this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly.

Like Helene, Nel becomes exactly what the community wishes her to be. It is all-too-familiar process of commodification wherein Nel is used for the gratification and reinforcement of patriarchal
order. Unable to find employment and thus respectability, Jude imagines that being married to Nel can give him some posture of adulthood that a wife can somehow fill the void of economic and emotional incompleteness in his life:

*Whatever his fortune, whatever the ct of his garment, there would always be the hem the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up.*\(^1\)

And Nel, for her part, willingly wishes to be an objectified nonentity; she finds solace in the stereotype of the loving, dutiful wife precisely because she, too, seeks protection from Nature, Time, and the unexpectedness of Death. In short, Jude and Nel are equally products of a community which looks to whatever kind of controlling mechanism that may protect them from the impingements of the world.

In *Sula*, however, Morrison creates a character who wishes to break free from this social cycle of denial and certitude. She wishes to create her own reality which thrives upon the fluidity and free-play of call and response and does not seek Bottom like constructs as an affrontery to contradiction and chaos. While Nel attempts to find her self and place in her childhood dream for some fiery
prince, Sula leaves the Bottom seeking her own dream of herself galloping on a horse at top speed. She becomes the archetypal running man of American literature who seeks a physical as well as emotional freedom from the order and control of society. Because her travels will be unstructured and nondirectional, they will reinforce her noncommittal position of hers, as the narrator later comments, is an experimental life. Thus ends Part One of Sula; on the very day of Nel’s wedding Sula departs from the Bottom, and thereafter Nel’s and Sula’s relationship will remain forever changed. Yet in the death of their once thriving friendship will commence another dialectical process between Sula and the community.

The novel closed with this mournful, belated recognition that with Sula, Nel had achieved her sense of ne-ness. With Sula she had attempted to discover herself through experience, and thus, for a time, she had circumvented the survivalist confines of the Bottom. With Sula, Nel may have transformed her life: and if she and her community had tried to under imaginative attempts towards creative action and perhaps broken the bonds of a sexist, introjected order. Instead, Nel is left with just circles and circles of sorrow; and therein Morrison suggests that a synthesis of call and response cannot occur so long cannot occur so long as all of the
Bottom’s inhabitants and their descendants remain trapped within a behavioral and perceptual order that denies human diversity and potential.

Milkman Dead, in Morrison’s third novel, *Song of Solomon*, completes heroic quest for an identity and place within the community. She depicts Milkman in mythic terms. Not only does his story follow a cohesive pattern of miraculous birth, youth/alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration into community, but Morrison also infuses it with both Western and African-American myths which blend together the mundane with the magical and the factual with the fantastic. Morrison Juxtaposes her own mythic variations with the reality of Milkman conservative, middle-class family which, like himself and his community, is fractured by the absence of a historical or cultural identity. This juxtaposition is central to the novel in that Morrison uses myth to tie Milkman and his people to their historical and cultural past and, more important, to underscore their need for a black cultural and historical context.

The novel focuses on two morally and ethically antithetical positions, which are represented within the same black family. The father, Macon Dead II, who lives in and espouses the American
Dream myth, promulgates the belief that the introjections of white capitalism’s competitive, success-oriented motivations and actions are the only viable alternatives for the fulfillment and advancement of the black race. In short, Macon Dead (Makin dead) has buried whatever black identity or heritage he has in an effort to accumulate wealth and the semblance of white upper middle-class status and thus, like blue eyes and Shirley Temple, Macon’s myth distorts and dislocates the realities of black life.

Early in the novel he tells his son that there is only one important thing you’ll ever need to know, own things, and let the things you own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too. Macon’s manipulation of power and of people as objects not only inhibits him from establishing loving, sensitive relationships, but it also enables him to escape his own identity and heritage own children save for his capitalist pronouncements and achievements. Consequently, for the Macon Dead family, the American Dream has replaced the memory of a black cultural heritage.

Macon’s insensitivity has infected his entire family. His wife, Ruth, whom he treats abominably by periodically beating her and denying her love and sexual gratification, has withdrawn into a
fantasy world seeking comfort in sleeping on her father’s grave and nursing Milkman until he is eight years old, Macon’s two daughters, first Corinthians and Magdalena called Lena, having received little love in their lives, regale themselves in the material trappings of middle-class ritual and convention. And because he knows no other way, Milkman, for a time, passively accepts his in the real estate and rental business. In short, the atmosphere surrounding the Dead family hardly constitutes what one might call a loving and warm one but is instead, cold and cruelly comical. Morrison’s use of irony and hyperbole is worth nothing here:

Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred for his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices. Under the frozen heat of his glance they tripped over doorsills and dropped the salt cellar into the yolks of their poached eggs. The way he mangled their grace, wit, and selfesteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and
drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do

with themselves.\textsuperscript{13}

Macon and his family exemplify the patriarchal, nuclear family which traditionally has been a critical and stable feature in Western societies. However, the destructive undercurrents of manipulation and objection of Western values, particularly in light of the disjunctive social and economic realities within black American communities. As a consequence, the Macon Dead family, rigid with convention and construct, is left muted and emotionally drained.

But these images do not begin the novel. Instead, the opening scene presents a mandril from which Morrison develops her contrastive and transformational mythopoesis. When Milkman is born, he is the first black baby admitted to the town’s white only Mercy Hospital. He is born on the day after Robert Smith, a North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent, leaps to his death from the roof of Mercy. Vowing in a letter that he would take off from Mercy and fly away on his own wings, he attracts a crowd of forty of fifty people who stand to watch even though it is the dead of winter. In the crowd are Ruth, pregnant with Milkman, and her two young daughters. The sight of Smith clad in his “blue silk wings” causes
Ruth to drop her peck basket full of red velvet rose petals. Her half-grown daughters scramble about trying to catch them, while the mother moans and hold the underside of her stomach. In the midst of these images of flight, roses, and labor pains, Milkman’s Aunt Pilate, sister to Macon and at this point in the text identified only as a woman singer, bursts into song about “Sugarman”:

“O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home. . .”

She also appears as a prophetess predicting Milkman’s birth, as she tells Ruth, that a little bird’ll be here with the morning. All of which compels the onlookers to think of this entire spectacle as some from of worship and in a way it is, for what they and we are witnessing is a mythic enactment of heroic birth in addition to a prefigurement of Morrison’s entire mythopoesis.

During Milkman’s childhood, he is sheltered and nurtured to an extreme: his mother breast-feeds him beyond infancy, and in doing so, she feels like the miller’s daughter- the one who sat at night in a straw filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstilskin had given her to see golden thread stream from her
very own shuttle. All of these introductory images of barrenness, celebration, subterfuge, and shelter lend a kind of simple fairytale quality to the story; and further, beyond these moments, Milkman’s childhood itself has a certain vagueness to it, which is also inherent in a traditional story of the mythic hero. Myth, according to Roland Barthes, abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it establishes a blissful clarity, things appear to mean something by themselves. And indeed with the imposition of myth, Morrison appears to have provided a clear foundation for a traditional story of heroic quest.

But there is much that is unstable in this opening scene of mythic reenactment. Barthes claims that myth transforms history into nature and to a certain degree, Milkman’s historical beginnings appear to become naturalized. However, Morrison characteristically inverts and thus undercuts these naturalized images, and in doing so, begins to recreate her own special mythos. Milkman is born during the winter season that symbolizes death, and the spectre of his birth is greeted by Ruth’s red velvet roses which also symbolize death; but more importantly they are artificial roses and thus suggest an impoverishment to the extreme. And finally, the most obvious and humorous inversion in this mythic
reenactment is that Milkman is born Dead. It is a metaphor which will linger and influence much of his life, as he later says, that you gonna do me in, my name is Milkman, remember? I’m already dead. Born into the community’s principal family, Milkman should have nothing but silver spoon success in his life; instead, he senses his deadness at the early age of four. When he discovers that only birds and airplanes can fly he becomes bereft of all imagination. If anything, Milkman is born into and lives and entirely unnatural existence; his life is grounded from the very beginning by distortion and disaffection. The remainder of the novel encompasses Milkman attempts to overcome his own disaffection, to learn to fly again, and thus to transcend the unblissful in authenticity surrounding his life.

Morrison continues her mythopoesis in the structural multiplicity that is apparent in the novel’s early stages. These shifting and multiple perspectives serve to dramatize the limitations of the heroic myth as merely an existential abstraction. Surrounding Milkman are other characters who provide guidance and example and thereby confirm Milkman’s centrality in the text; but often the isolation and the alienation that he experiences parallel other characters lives. Therefore, Morrison attempts to
adapt the heroic quest and its outcome to both individual and collective levels within a black historical context.

For instance, the disaffection which Milkman experiences in his adult life is, in some ways, foreshadowed by his mother. Ruth has lived a baby doll existence elegance of her father’s class conscious upbringing, and she has been rendered invisible and inconsequential by her boorish and dominating husband. She had, in short, lived her life in service to the patriarchal order. She finds meaning and presence in her life through a watermark on the dining room table. Throughout her father’s life, it was there that a bowl of fresh flowers had stood every day. Now, she regards the stain as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assures her that the world is still there that she is alive somewhere.

Loveless and invisible, Ruth also clings selfishly to Milkman, using him, like the watermark, as a measure of personal stability while realizing that her son has never been a person to her, a separate real person. He has always been a passion. Milkman is her single triumph, and her personal affrontery to a world that has given her neither love nor purpose. The used has necessarily become the user; first in her father and later in Milkman, she lives her life in the memory and passion of another’s gaze.
In perhaps the most telling scene, the entire family’s torpid position is made analogous to their touring car. Each Sunday, Macon takes his family for a Sunday drive and although it is a less ambitious ritual for Ruth, it is a way, nevertheless, for her to display her family. For Macon, this ritual is much too important for him to enjoy. Ironically, however, what appears as a dignified, stately ritual for the Dead family is seen with a whole lot of amusement by some community members. Again, the community’s playfulness serves to identify incongruity in their midst. For the Dead family, the wide green Packard has no practical function beyond the self-serving ritual of familial exposition:

Macon hailed no one and no one hailed him. There was nerve a sudden braking and backing up to shout or laugh with a friend. No beer bottles or ice cream cones poked from the open windows. Nor did a baby boy stand up to pee out of them. He never let rain fall on it if he could help it and he walked to Sonny’s Shop – taking the car out only on these occasions.¹⁵

Pilate and her family subsist in materially impoverished surroundings, making and selling bootleg wine, by Milkman sees that Pilate, while she is anything but pretty, is neither dirty nor
drunk. She presents herself to the boys as she appears in the beginning of the novel with the presence of strength, confidence, and good humor. She is the archetypal, black folk singer and oral storyteller whose personal stories give shape to a collective consciousness.

To the two young boys, her presence is magical and mysterious, and as the odor of pine and fermenting wine sends them into a pleasant semi-stupor Pilate entrances the boys with a partial story of her life:

Hadn’t been for your daddy, I wouldn’t be here today. I would have died in the womb. And died again in the woods. Those and the dark would have surely killed me. But he saved me and here I am boiling eggs. Our papa was dead, you see, They blew him five feet up into the air. He was sitting on his fence waiting for ’em and tey snuck up from behind and blew him five feet into the air. So when we left Circe’s big house we didn’t have no place to go, so we just walked around and lived in them woods. . .And talking about dark! You think dark is just one color, but it ain’t. There’re five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some woolly. Some just empty. Some like
fingers. and it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another.¹⁶

Encapsulated into Pilate’s untethered story is the familiar violence, degradation, and victimization that surround black life. The woods and the darkness convey the fear, loneliness, and alienation of black reality, but Pilate also testifies to the courage and self-sufficiency that she and Macon demonstrated and, even though they now travel diametrically opposing paths, they continue to demonstrate.

On the surface, however, both families remain split apart by their two modes of self-awareness, and this point of devisiveness place Milkman in an alienated position of desire and vacillation. Identity for Pilate is found in a connective energy, one that evokes a living heritage through story and song. Macon teaches his son that identity can only be found in the future, in his linear vision to own things, own people, and therefore own yourself. He wishes to escape the past because it has, for him, no materially functional purpose.

Displaced between these two visions, Milkman chooses not to choose. Rather than attaching himself to any belief or commitment and acting from any set of principles, Milkman only reacts, self-
consciously and indifferently, to whatever transpires about him. As he grows older, he passively submits to beings his father’s lackey, collecting rents, keeping the books. His passive position is physically manifested in his deformed gait. Since one of his legs is shorter than the other, he limps, and he attempts to disguise his defect with an affected walk, the strut of a very young man trying to appear more sophisticated than he is.

Early in the novel a pattern develops which shows that women exist for males as mere operatives. Mothers and lovers live for and linger in the presence and absence of dead fathers, dead husbands, and indifferent male lovers. They appear, like Milkman, as passive victims, they convey understanding and guidance, and even, like Pilate, they appear as free-flyers who project a self-sustaining image. But never does their alienation, their awareness, or their apparent freedom lead to a positive engagement with the community. They remain decentered, disengaged, and are even killed off in the text. No matter how similar they appear, they lack Milkman’s possibilities, they play no central role, their dreams, if they have them at all, remain unfulfilled until the male hero fulfills them. As Simone de Beauvoir says of women in her The Second Sex, the women in Song of Solomon still dream through the dreams
of men Thus Morrison’s use of multiple parallel perspectives does not entirely resolve the male centered mythic bias in the novel.

Toni Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), represents both a departure from her earlier novels and an extension of her previous concerns. Images of detachment, exile, and indecision pervade the novel and remain fixed presences throughout thus, unlike *Song of Solomon*, for instance, there is a decided lack of transmutation in *Tar Baby*. Each character, in one way or another, remains disconnected from identity and place, from community and memory; and whatever past they retain remains inaccessible, held separate, by dreams and dream visions. Yet, like her earlier novels, even these fixed and complex images of lack continue to reflect and express the urgency, difficulty, and in this novel perhaps, the impossibility of preserving a generational continuity and a collective unconsciousness within an increasingly individual, fragmented Western culture.

The setting for the novel is the tropical Carribbean isle des Chevaliers. Its name commemorates the legend that black slaves were struck blind upon first seeing the island, and that their blind descendants continue to ride horses around the hillside. The narrator infuses the island with its own collective consciousness.
Here, amongst themselves, emperor butterflies talk, fist listen, champion daisy trees look serene, and voices whisper together from the island’s swamp. Taken together, legend, blindness and natural cohesion become metaphors for social difference as they are contrasted with the island’s white inhabitants.

Their intrusion distorts the form of freedom that is represented in the island animated, subterranean world. The white vacationers must alter the course of the island’s river in order to build a collection of magnificent winter houses. Thereafter, the island articulates its lack by being transformed into a kind of postlapsarian paradise; the monsoons ceases, the trees mutter, and the swamp become a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes can not live near. This abduction of the island threatening, collective consciousness provides a frame for the novel’s developing dialectic between the presence of individual assertion and the absence of cultural cohesiveness.

Valerian and Margaret street own one of the magnificent tropical winter mansions, L’Arbe de la Croix. He is a retired candy manufacturer from Philadelphia; she a former beauty queen form Maine. Sydney and Ondine Childs are their black servants. Jadine
Childs is their orphaned niece whose Sorbonne education has been funded by Valerian. Together, they create a climate of outward calm and stability where, as the narrator notes that almost nothing is askew and the few things that are have charm. Valerian, as his imperial name implies, is particularly intent upon asserting a ritualized control over his environs and his household. His demonstration of control appears innocuous and idyllic as he spends much of his time in a greenhouse, which he built as a place of controlled ever-flowering life to greet death in.

Into his ritual paradise Valerian had brought with him some records, garden shears, sixty-four-bulb chandelier, a light blue tennis shirt, and the Principal Beauty of Maine. Valerian married Margaret, twenty years his junior, because, as a seventeen-year-old beauty queen, she was all red and write, like the candy he manufactured. She is an object of beauty, to be admired and savored, and in the main, her purpose in life for the Street family has been to produce a male heir to the candy kingdom. Margaret functions appropriately; she produces a boy, Michael, and she worships her candy magnate husband, living for two at restaurants and even takes her to, and dinners for two at restaurants and even alone at home. But as a young women from modest means, she is
completely unprepared for the life of a wealthy wife, and thus she feels drowned in the spaciousness of the house and is often left to amuse herself in solitude, while she alone raises their child.

Their two servants, Sydney and Ondine, also hail from Philadelphia. They have spent their entire adult lives ministering to Valerian’s and Margaret’s needs, anticipating their every whim, and appearing to be firmly in control of the household’s daily affairs. Because of their “industriousness”, Sydney and Ondine have assumed the label of Philadelphia Negroes – the proudest people in the race. They believe themselves superior to lower class blacks but, in reality, because of their accepted positions in the Street conclave, they have only further distanced themselves from any kind of distinct community. They express their class consciousness by never bothering to learn the actual names of the island’s black natives and, for instance, call the mansion’s gardener Yardman.

Jadine or Jade, orphaned since the age of twelve, is ostensibly spending a few months on the Isle in order to visit her surrogate parents and her benefactors. She is portrayed in the story as the epitome of the jet-set character – beautiful, intelligent, refined, and ambitious. With Valerian’s assistance, she has completed a degree in Art History, has become a promising Parisian. But she appears
early in the novel as being apprehensive about her future and uncomfortable with her social and financial success. Like Margaret, Jadine is in the process of assuming the role of object and commodity which makes her feel lonely and inauthentic.

As the narrator introduces the household characters, it becomes increasingly clear that they all share distinct commonalities. Each appears isolated not only from others or from a secure place, but they also appear disconnected from a particular tradition or set of shared values. To compensate for their lack, each character, willingly or not, assumes a position which serves to mask and ultimately evade any signs of difference that may encroach upon them.

On the island, Valerian has established a new beginning for himself. Although he outwardly tells the others that they will someday return to Philadelphia, he never intends to do so. His uncorrupted greenhouse allows no past and no future; here is the timelessness of a prelapsarian state. It shuts out the inexplicable and allows in only the predictable; and like his study back in Philadelphia, it embodies Valerian’s life-long desire to remain aloof and innocent of anything which he can neither understand nor accept. His creed is, as he says: “I can’t be responsible for things
outside of my control”. He leads, therefore, and idealistic life of subjective control, full of selectivity and/or denial or experience and free from contradiction and incongruity. In short, the master of the household has safely shaped his perspective into a compartmentalized, self-assertive design.

Humanist discourse strives to identify antipodal situations in order to arrive at thematically unifying solutions. The categories in *Tar Baby* are endlessly apparent: rich/poor, privileged/downtrodden, natural/unnatural, bourgeois/folk, freedom/isolation, stasis/movement, tied to oppositional perspectives, we assume, like Valerian, the other’s gaze, reveling in the apparent contradiction because we can manage it through valorization and derision. But for the remainder of the novel, Morrison deconstructs binary opposition in order to demonstrate that, for blacks or for any minority, no position can be made mutually exclusive; under the gaze of the dominant group, all positions in black consciousness tenuously converge at mutual attraction and repulsion; neither individual assertion nor collective tradition remain fixed, rarefied positions. Therefore, the novel’s black characters demonstrate not so much a clash of class and culture, but a condition of marginality, a cultural given in black life that is
infused with desire and repression, with acceptance and withdrawal.

Morrison centers this cultural duplicity in the burgeoning love affair between Jade and Son. Both express a desire and repulsion toward the other that immediately manifests itself in their first encounter. When Son enters unannounced into Jade’s bedroom, she is at once transfixed by his image that she envisions in the mirror. As she stares into the mirror, she perceives his wild, aggressive, vicious hair while she struggles to pull herself away from his image and to yank her tongue from the roof of her mouth. To free herself at last from the image which, to her, looks physically overpowering, she frames it into the picture that only Margaret had seen clearly in her bedroom. Once she is freed at last, she turns to the real presence of son in her bedrooms, but sees only the riverbed darkness of his face.

For the remainder of the novel, Jadine and Son attempt to resolve their mutually conflicting and intersectional positions. To do so, they must necessarily continue to negotiate between attraction and repulsion, between difference and lack which, as the narrative proceeds, is further underscored by Jade’s and Son’s perceptive distinctions between the actual and the dream, between
the real and the ideal. The couple’s first experiential attempts to resolve their perceptive difference and lack is propelled and preceded by a serious form of rupture within the island household. As the household mediates between apprehension and acceptance of son, his disruptive difference, little by little, exposes an unspoken narrative that forms a subtext in the novel, and culminates in the exposure of Margaret’s maternal secret – that she habitually abused Michael when he was a baby. Seemingly incidental to the valent relationship of Jade and Son, Morrison has been building a second suspense.

Like the Hawthornian character who fatefully suffers forever for the sin of disconnection from humanity, Valerian is ironically left with the peril of a second, guilt-ridden childhood. But in it, he belatedly comes to accept that vulnerability must be a necessary part of the human condition, and thus while he has remained willfully innocent, Margaret knew the bottomlessness – she had looked at it, dived in it and pulled herself out – obviously tougher that he.

And indeed, it is Margaret who manages afterwards to hold together the demoralized house. She cannot hope to explain her unacceptable acts of abuse beyond her own sense of inadequacy
that when Michael was an infant he seemed to want everything of her, and she didn’t know what to give. But she nonetheless appears to Valerian as strengthened from the experience precisely because she has long accepted her action, however deplorable or inexplicable, as one of life’s painful possibilities.

Therese plays her pivotal maternal role in her novel. In Son's state of culture irresolution, Therese directs him through her primal vision which, as a means of closure, can find its expression only in the simplicity and certainly of legend and myth. In the novel's moment of magical transformation, Therese guides Son again through the water and presents him with his mythic alternative:

The men are waiting for you. You can choose now. You can get free of her. They are waiting in the hills for you. They are naked and they are blind too ... they race those horses like angels all over the hills where the rain forest is, where the champion daisy trees still grow,. Go there. Choose them.¹⁷

When Son obeys Therese and accepts his mythic role as a blind horseman, he is, as his emergence onto the island suggests, reborn and returns to the island as one of her naked sons:
First he crawled the rocks one by one, one by one, till his hands touched shore and the nursing sound of the sea was behind him. He felt around, crawled off and then stood up. Breathing heavily with his mouth open he took a few tentative steps.\textsuperscript{18}

He thereafter assumes the form of the eternal running man as the mist lifts and the trees step back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Merging the actual with the dream, and looking neither to the left nor to the right, Son runs Lickety-split, Lickety-lickety-lickety-split into a collective narrative unconsciousness which, in its communal blindness, depends upon seclusion and invisibility as a means of expressing social difference and freedom.

Jadine, grounded as she is in the real, is accorded no such mythic expulsion in the text. It has been argued, and rightly so, that Jadine’s withdrawal from the ancestor and her eventual return to Paris indicates, for instance, as Marilyn E. Mobley suggests, her refusal to define herself in terms of familial past, historical tradition, and cultural heritage. Jade’s withdrawal is precipitated by her own perception that what Son and Eloe offer is to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility
rather than originality, nurturing instead of building. Morrison comments, in an interview with Claudia Tate, that Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure. Thus judging from the author’s extra-textual statements, Jadine’s withdrawal from this combination and her acceptance of disconnection from a cultural heritage serve as an indictment against her for denying the cultural knowledge that may further empower her.

*Tar Baby* appears, then, as a cautionary, instructive tale which, as Mobley points out the shows that the black woman who denies her historical connections and sacred properties risks psychic chaos and alienation. But given the circumstances surrounding Jadin’s choices, it appears more likely that psychic chaos and alienation are not simply risked, they remain, as they have throughout within the text’s narrative design. While Jadine appears to choose and, in doing so, rejects cultural memory and imagination, they continue to intrude. As she departs for Paris, she consciously believes that she has the safety she longs for; in her momentary resolve, she expresses, unlike Son or Valerian a transcendence of place and circumstance as a means of order and identity, and locates it instead within the potentialities of self.
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