

## ***Paradise*: Toni Morrison's Development of a Non-Race Oriented Attitude Towards Inter-Race relationships**

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White folks and black folks should not sit down and eat together. ... They should work together sometimes, but they should not eat together or live together or sleep together. Do any of those personal things in life.<sup>1</sup>

The novels of the renowned, Nobel prize-winner, African-American novelist Toni Morrison have always been preoccupied with racial problems. Starting from her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison's aim was to (re) investigate black history in America and to expose the white racial prejudice which subjected black people to great physical, psychological, and social problems. Her novels always projected her overwhelming concern with the inter-racial relationships in which white people were almost invariably oppressors and black people always oppressed. However, her latest novel, *Paradise* (1998) seems to break away from this overwhelming concern.

Morrison's *Paradise* expresses a humanitarian attitude towards race relations which has not been expressed in any developed sense in any of her previous works. In his book *Literature and Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era*, Gregory Eiselein defines

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humanitarianism as any position taken to "promote the welfare of [all] human beings by reducing pain and suffering, giving aid and care to those who suffer, and eliminating the causes of suffering."<sup>2</sup> In *Paradise*, Morrison seems to be taking this position in her treatment of her characters, especially the women in the Convent, and their relationships with each other. This position is revealed not only in the fact that she does not separate her white and black characters, but most importantly in the fact that she does not reveal the characters' racial identities, which marks a significant development in her attitude towards inter-racial relationships and her attitude towards whites.

When Morrison portrayed white/black relationships in her earlier novels, she always communicated to her readers an implicit separatism: "white folks and black folks should not live together," and if they do, their relationship is always one of actual or latent conflict. In *Tar Baby*, the characters live together in apparent harmony, but are separated by race and class divisions which eventually and inevitably erupt during the Christmas dinner Margaret prepares. The race and class divisions of *Tar Baby*, and of Morrison's other novels, are always shown to be sustained by a deep-seated white racist ideology which promotes whites' assumed superiority and hence their oppressive treatment of blacks. Valerian, for instance, is resentful when Sydney, Ondine and Son have the 'audacity' to dispute his decision to fire Thérèse and Gideon: "I am being questioned by these people," he says, "as if, as if I *could* be called into question." (*Tar Baby*, p. 177)

In works following *Tar Baby*, Morrison again brings black and white characters together and suggests

that it might be possible for them to live together. However, she lays certain conditions (which always seem to be impossible) for them to do so without conflict. Her short story, "Recitatif" (1983), provides a clue to these conditions and also to *Paradise*. The story is about the life and relationship of an African American woman and a white woman whose racial identities are not overtly stated. But in telling their stories, as their relationship develops from childhood into adulthood, Morrison gives us clues which make it clear who is black and who is white. Roberta and Twyla's relationship starts when they are eight years old in a state home for abandoned and orphaned children. Two lonely and scared girls, they form a close, if short-lived, friendship which ends when they leave the home and each goes her way. Their paths cross, repeatedly and by chance, as they grow into adulthood. As adults, their relationship is different, full of conflicts and struggles which seem to suggest not only the differences in their respective races, but also the differences in character that different experiences bring out.

The way Morrison portrays the nature of the relationship between Roberta and Twyla as children is intriguing. As two lonely and scared children who are neglected by a "dancing mother" and a "sick mother" and who are yearning for stability and security, the two girls become friends. Sharing the same conditions, they "Knew what nobody else in the world knew,"<sup>3</sup> and they only needed "an understanding nod" from each other to seal their friendship. In a home where there was "all kinds of kids, ... black ones, white ones, even two Koreans," (Recitatif, p. 169) race was not a determining factor. The fact that they "looked like salt and pepper" (Recitatif, p. 160) did not matter for children. Sharing the same conditions of loneliness and insecurity,

they related and sympathized as human beings who depended on each other's humanity. It is only when they grow older and become open to external influences that the "black-white" issue turns their childhood relationship into one of conflict.

Roberta and Twyla meet again as young women and Roberta (who is then revealed as the white one) ignores and dismisses Twyla because, she explains years later when they meet again as married women, "you know how it was in those days: black-white. You know how everything was." Twyla, however, does not find the explanation convincing because her experiences told her that "blacks were very friendly with whites in those days." They "roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protesters." (Recitatif, p. 196) just as the women's experiences have become different so have their feelings towards each other. In a significant scene the change in their relationship becomes obvious. Meeting again and by chance while Twyla is driving and Roberta, along with other women, is protesting against the integration of school buses, their differences and their conflicts develop into a racial confrontation:

The women were moving. Our faces looked mean to them of course and they looked as though they could not wait to throw themselves in front of a police car, or better yet, into my car and drag me away by my ankles. Now they surrounded my car and gently, gently began to rock it. I swayed back and forth like a side way yo-yo. Automatically I reached for Roberta, like the old days in the orchard [in the state home] when they [the older girls] saw us watching them and we had to get out of there, and if one of us was caught the other stayed to kick and scratch, and neither would leave the other behind. My arm shot out of the car window but no receiving hand was there. Roberta

was looking at me sway from side to side in the car and her face was still. (Recitatif, p. 169)

Just as her life and social class has changed (which was "easy" for her because as Twyla thinks "everything is easy" for them. They think they own the world."(Recitatif, p.167), Roberta's ideologies and loyalties have also changed.

In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison portrays another white/black relationship in which the human condition is what determines the nature of the relationship. The two runaways, Sethe and Amy, a slave in quest of freedom and a white indentured servant in quest of red velvet, meet. In spite of their different dreams and the racial division, they form a kind of family relationship which allows Sethe to be "reckless" (a "recklessness born of desperation and encouraged by Amy's fugitive eyes and tenderhearted mouth"<sup>4</sup>) and trust Amy, and allows Amy, who was struck dumb by Sethe's condition, to stop to help her, rub her feet back to life, try to cure her back and help her deliver her baby.

On a riverbank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggle under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at that moment couldn't care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together appropriately and well. A patroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws -- a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinned hair -- wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no patroller came and no preacher. There was nothing to disturb them in their work. So, they did it appropriately and well. (*Beloved*, pp. 84-85)

Again Morrison here lays the conditions under which human relatedness would be possible. In this situation, there is nothing to separate the two women in terms of social or economic class differences (they were both throw-away people, lawless outlaws dressed in rags); no external agencies (no patroller or preacher came to disturb them). There is, however, the internal (and probably unconscious) feeling of superiority which taints Amy and seems to undermine her humanity, though it does not create a conflict between her and Sethe. Morrison brings out this feeling of superiority in Amy's general behavior, towards Sethe, which recalls W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, that the white world is "a world that looks on [black people] in amused contempt and pity."<sup>5</sup> Amy helps and sympathizes, not empathizes: "Glad I ain't you." (*Beloved*, p. 79) But in spite of the sympathy, she finds it natural to ask and use Sethe's first name (Sethe could not do the same, she can only call her 'Miss'), calls her 'girl', 'dump nigger' and "prod ... her hip" with her toe to wake her up (*Beloved*, p. 82). Amy does not treat Sethe as an equal, a fact that implies that Morrison probably shares with her character Baby Suggs the belief that "even when they [whites] thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did." (*Beloved*, p. 244) This is farther confirmed in *Beloved* through her portrayal of Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the humane owners of Sweet Home. The Garners treat their slaves well, but Mrs. Garner is amused by Sethe's 'childish' and unrealistic desired to have a marriage ceremony and maybe even a preacher to marry her and Halle. As Slaves, they do not get married, they take each other up. Mr. Garner treats his slaves as 'men', but it appears that he does that to prove his own manhood, not theirs.

Though Morrison shows that human relatedness is possible if social, political and racial ideologies do not interfere, she also seems to suggest that this interference is inevitable. Her white characters, the Streets in *Tar Baby*, Roberta and Amy's language and behaviour betray the racist ideology which promotes their feelings of superiority which in itself undermines their humanity and makes them subject to judgment and criticism.

In an interview in 1989 Morrison said, "what I really want to do, and expect to do, is not identify my characters by race." However, she also affirmed, "I won't be writing about white people. I will be writing about black people. It will be part of my job to make sure my readers aren't confused."<sup>6</sup> In *Beloved* there are two incidents in which she does not identify the characters by race. Nevertheless, their behaviour and reactions reveal their identities. In one incident, Paul D and Sethe are walking down the street when four women approach from the opposite direction, "Paul D touched Sethe's elbow to guide her as they stepped from the slates to the dirt to let the women pass." (*Beloved*, p. 129) In another incident, Stamp Paid and Paul D are sitting on the steps of a church when a rider stops to ask them about a girl called Judy and to point out to Paul D that he should not be drinking at the steps of the church. From the reaction of the black characters we immediately understand that the four women and the rider are white. In *Beloved* and other novels, Morrison's readers are never confused as to the racial identities of the characters. In *Paradise*, however, Morrison deliberately confuses us as to the identity of the women in the Convent. She said that it would be "liberating" to her and to her relationship to language and to text to "write without having to always identify to the reader the race of the characters."<sup>7</sup> It seems that in *Paradise*

she has finally liberated herself from the tendency to view her characters and their relationships in terms of race.

Unlike "Recitatif" and *Beloved*, Morrison in *Paradise* does not give us any clues to the racial identities of the Convent women, one of whom is white, as we are told in the startling opening sentence of the novel: "They Shoot the white girl first."<sup>8</sup> We only get to know them as people who are suffering from past experiences which have left them all lonely and insecure. They come to the Convent, just as Roberta and Twyla came to the state home, betrayed and abandoned by people they loved or by life in general, and what they need and are looking for is security. Who is white and who is black then does not matter, not for us and not for them, not even for the men who hunt and kill them. They, like Roberta and Twyla, accept and identify with each other and they do not ask questions, not from a lack of interest, but because they already know what there is to know. At the end when Connie teaches them to share and to come to terms with their pain, they do share "and it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale." (*Paradise*, p. 264) The point of the sharing, of 'stepping into each other's dreams', is the internal identification with the suffering, the desires and the fears of an/other human being regardless of the color or the physical difference of that other. The interesting thing, here, is that in this humanitarian identification there is no hint of what Eiselein calls "the traditional imbalance between the 'patients' of humanitarianism (the sufferers, the persons needing help) and the humanitarian 'agents' (those who do the helping)."<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, in the relationship between the women



in the Convent, all of them are both 'patients' and 'agents'. They all suffer and they all understand and help each other overcome the suffering and heal.

In an interview, after the publication of the novel, Morrison asserts that she does not give any clues to the racial identity of these women "on purpose." She insists that she "wanted the readers to wonder about the race of these girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter." What really matters is what mattered to Roberta and Twyla as children, the human condition, the suffering which human beings, regardless of race, might go through and which brings them together. Race, Morrison continues, is "the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information but it tells you next to nothing" about the person, the individual.<sup>10</sup> In all her novels, Morrison is committed to the ethnic and cultural identity of her people. In *Paradise*, she still shows this same commitment in her portrayal and representation of black life in the community of Ruby. She still insists on black people holding on to their origins, which here she extends to Africa, and their cultural values and identity. However, the way she tackles the issue of race, or more specifically, her partial exclusion of the issue by not revealing the racial identity of the Convent women and by focusing on the *human* relationship which binds them, she, as Paul Gray comments, is struggling "against the use of racial categories, or any categories, as a means of keeping groups of people powerless and excluded."<sup>11</sup>

One of the most significant points in *Paradise* is Morrison's treatment of the response and reaction of the black community of Ruby, especially the men, to the women in the Convent. When the women first arrive at the Convent, the people in Ruby regard them as "strange

neighbors ... but harmless." (*Paradise*, p. 11) However, gradually this 'strangeness' and the difference of the women, which becomes more pronounced as they mix more with the community, is accentuated and eventually puts them in the category of 'Other', the incomprehensible stranger whose difference becomes a threat to the conventions and the set values of the community. The men of Ruby decide to eliminate the threat by killing the women, and the way Morrison describes them is interesting:

They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, a palm leaf cross, hand cuffs, Mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns. (*Paradise*, p. 3)

The equipment evokes lynch mobs, police forces and witch trials, all of which suggest that Morrison's struggle against oppression has, in this novel, widened in scope and reference to include a powerful criticism against any categorization that would lead to the exclusion or persecution of others. The fact that in *Paradise* those who are persecuted are of mixed races and that they are not persecuted because of their race, but because of their difference, and that their persecutors are black is a strong indication that persecution in itself, whatever its cause or target, is the focus of her censure.

Although Morrison, in the widened scope of her struggle against all kinds of persecution, seems to be focusing less on racial oppression, it is still clear that she has not dismissed the issue. What she is trying to do in *Paradise* is deliver the message that "forcing people to react racially to another person is to miss the whole

point of humanity." By "withholding the racial markers," as she puts it in an interview, which are "exaggerated and exploited for political and economic purposes," she gives the reader to understand that s/he must not draw on "stereotypical information, ... learned responses, ... [and] habitual reaction," which are "the easiest and laziest way to evaluate other people," but to try to do "the different thing and the important thing [which] is to know people as individuals."<sup>12</sup> In *Paradise*, we and the characters, especially the women characters, get to know the Convent women, their past, their interior lives, their fears, their faults and their guilts, their vulnerabilities and their strengths, and we evaluate them according to these things; and finally, except for our curiosity, their race really does not matter any more.

In this novel then, Morrison seems to be moving, and to be moving her characters and her readers towards a humanitarian position. Her humanitarianism, however, seems to fall under what Eiselein calls "eccentric humanitarianism", which is a break and a transcendence from the "conventional humanitarianism which, though it aims at eliminating human suffering, tends to "disregard ... the ideas, feelings, and circumstances of those who receive ... humanitarian care."<sup>13</sup> As a writer and a humanitarian 'agent', Morrison, in this novel, unlike her other work, uses her power and authority to plead the case of the women for each other and for the reader to see them as human beings who need sympathy and understanding. She gives us access to their fears, insecurities and vulnerabilities, but above all she does not reveal their racial identities which might undermine their suffering. Unlike "Recitatif" and *Beloved*, in *Paradise* there is no use of language and no behavior which would indicate who is white and hence imply and

invite criticism and judgment. Morrison has protected her unknown white character against the reader's judgment and has liberated herself from the race-oriented perception of whites which impelled her, in her other work, to deconstruct their humanity in defense of the humanity of her people. The women in the Convent are equal in their human suffering, and they receive equal sympathy and sometimes equal censure from each other, from the reader and from Morrison herself.

The argument I have just advanced would probably lead to the assumption, which I hinted at before, that Morrison in *Paradise* is dismissing the issue of race. This assumption, mistaken in my view, has already been made by some of her reviewers. Marianne Wiggins writes that "race is what Morrison has based her magnificent career on -- writing about race issues, race glories, the colour of the torn threads of race shot through America's fabric. To write about anything else would be to abandon her crown -- and in *Paradise* we see evidence of both her yearning and her sad failure in the process."<sup>14</sup> Wiggins is, of course, justified to a certain extent in her criticism, since Morrison herself has been critical of "people who invented the hierarchy of 'race' when it was convenient for them" but who are now trying "to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist." Morrison has always insisted on race difference and distinction and has always insisted that integration was not in the best interest of black people since it would endanger their "specific and revered [cultural] difference."<sup>15</sup> However, it is important to note that Morrison has not abandoned the issue of race. Rather, she has developed a humanitarian approach to it. First, she has come to see racial oppression as just one aspect of the bigger human problem in which people tend to exclude and persecute

those who are different. Second, she shows the possibility and the importance for relationships between people to be empathetic, capable of crossing the barriers of race to achieve a human understanding and recognition in which people can maintain their cultural and ethnic difference, and be accepted, without being treated as other. This, of course, sounds highly idealistic, even utopian. However, Morrison herself, by showing the persecution the women suffered and the initial individual differences that they had among themselves, seems to be aware of her own idealism and to be qualifying it.

## Notes

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- 1-Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Signet, 1983) p. 183.  
Subsequent references included in text.
- 2-Gregory Eiselein, *Literature and Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996) p. 174, n 17.
- 3-Toni Morrison, "Recitatif," in *Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. Linda Wagner-Martin and Cathy N. Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) p. 168.  
Subsequent references included in text.
- 4-Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987) p. 78.  
Subsequent references included in text.
- 5-W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1989) p. 5.
- 6-Bill Moyers, "A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) p. 266.
- 7-*Ibid*, p. 266.

8-Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998)

p. 3. Susequent references included in text.

9-Eiselein, p. 5.

10-Paul Gray, Paradise Found, *Time* Cover Story, January 19, 1998

<http://www.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/1998/dom/980119/cover.3/htm>

11-*Ibid.*

12-Nobel Prize-Winner Author Toni Morrison

<http://www.pathfinder.com/time/community/transcript/chat0121980.3/htm>

13-Eiselein, p. 5.

14-Marianne Wiggins, "No Winner in This Race," *Time*, 19 March, 1998, p. 43.

15-Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," in *Toni Morrison*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990) p. 203.

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