

# A grammatical analysis of toni morrison's recitatif



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Societally, most individuals enjoy believing that they are without bias. Whether it be gender, race, disability, or religion, everyone has preconceived notions about select people groups. While this can be difficult to admit, Toni Morrison constructs her short story, *Recitatif*, in a manner which forces her readers to face their biases and stereotypes. Through the use of devices such as non-standard English, intentional pronouns, unusual sentence structure, modals, unique punctuation, and direct speech, Morrison portrays societal challenges based on race, socioeconomic status, and disability, arguing the importance of understanding and protecting people different from ourselves. The word *recitatif* relates to speech and is thought of as a medium between song and ordinary spoken word. Morrison emulates this concept of an oral tale through the use of non-standard English in the form of fragment sentences. This colloquial structure creates the illusion that the narrator is talking, recounting her past and pondering the events that happened. In addition, the use of fragments disrupts the paragraphs and calls attention to the information these fragments contain. Because it is not traditional to use fragments in professional writing, these phrases stand out and indicate important material.

The first time that Morrison introduces the character Maggie, Morrison writes, " Maggie fell down their once. The kitchen women with legs like parentheses"(2). The fragment " The kitchen women with legs like parentheses" identifies Maggie. Maggie symbolizes disabilities and her character portrays how individuals with disability can be overlooked and marginalized by society. Another instance in which Morrison uses fragments to portray theme is in the quote, " How to believe what had to be

believed”(10). The use of the fragment accentuates the statement and illustrates the key idea that individuals are able to justify actions of cruelty or injustice. Whether it be events that happen, or actions individuals perpetrate, Morrison implies that humans are able to compensate mentally for events by believing whatever they can to adjust personal and societal sins to be acceptable. A final instance where Morrison uses fragments to highlight theme is when Twyla explains that “ Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb”(18). Separating, “ Deaf, I thought, and dumb.” emphasizes these words and indicates their importance. Although Twyla’s mother is not literally deaf or dumb, this is the moment Twyla is finally able to admit why she harbors contempt for Maggie. Twyla is never able to tell her own mother the pain her mother’s lack of attention has caused her so she takes it out on a person who portrays her mother’s internal traits, externally. Recitatif is frequently studied because of the racial ambiguity it presents. Morrison introduces two characters, Roberta and Twyla and states that one is black and one is white, but does not specify which girl is which race.

One strategy that Morrison employs to conceal the races of her characters is the use of pronouns. When Twyla first meets Roberta, Twyla states that her mother would tell her that “ They never washed their hair and they smelled funny”(1) when talking about people from Roberta’s race. Morrison’s use of the pronoun they allows her to talk about a people group without hinting to her readers what race she is referring to. Additionally, after Roberta and Twyla are reunited after years of separation, Twyla sees the immense wealth Roberta has gained and justifies that “ Everything is so easy for them”(9). In

this quote Morrison uses the word them to refer to a people group, but is able to restrict further detail about which race she is referencing. Concealing the girl's races invites readers to guess about which girl belongs to which race. In doing this, Morrison affirms the idea that all people believe some sort of racial stereotypes. Throughout her story, Morrison will begin sentences with conjunctions. This unusual sentence structure indicates that crucial information is contained in this sentence. Generally, sentences do not begin with conjunctions, so the use of conjunctions almost jars the reader and leads them to pay attention to the following statement. Towards the beginning of Twyla's and Roberta's time together in the orphanage, Twyla explains that, " So for the moment it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there"(1). In the future, the fact that Twyla and Roberta belong to different races will drive them apart, but at this time it is deemed unimportant. The girls share a room and each of them belong to a family incapable of caring for them. This similarity outweighs their difference in race and connects them throughout their lives. Later on, when Twyla is reflecting about the emotional abuse she inflicted on Maggie, Twyla explains that, " And it shames me even now to think there was somebody in there after all who heard us call her names and couldn't tell on us"(3). Again, Morrison begins a sentence with a conjunction to create an almost disjointed sentence that draws the reader's focus. It is odd that Twyla must come to the realization that, " there was somebody in there." This language suggests that, as a child, Twyla viewed Maggie as somehow less than human because of her disabilities and is only now seeing that her actions affected the life of a fellow human being. As Twyla narrates about the events of her life she

seems to break away from telling the story about the past to add comments concerning her thoughts in the present.

Morrison's use of modality illustrates how the events of Twyla's life unfolded in opposition to how Twyla wished the event of her life had taken place.

When Twyla first mentions Maggie, she recounts an event where Maggie falls and the older girls laugh and make fun of Maggie. After explaining the event,

Twyla seems to break from the narration and introspectively admits that “

We should have helped her up”(2). The use of the modal should

distinguishes the events that did happen from the actions Twyla now

believes should have taken place. A similar break occurs after Roberta

reminds Twyla that Maggie did not fall on her own, but rather was pushed by the older girls in the orphanage. Twyla's narration is interrupted as Twyla

asks herself, “ I wouldn't forget a thing like that. Would I?”(14). Morrison

uses a modal verb to indicate that the narrator is reflecting. Would portrays

a break in confidence and shows that Twyla is unsure about the reliability of her memory. One of Morrison's most powerful uses of modal verbs is found

at the end of her story when Twyla thinks back on her time in the orphanage.

Twyla remembers screaming derogatory names at Maggie and admits “ I

knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't - just like me and I was glad about

that”(18). Twyla seems to correct herself adjusting her language from

wouldn't to couldn't. These two modals hold strongly different connotations.

Wouldn't indicates a choice and suggests that Maggie decided not to

scream, but couldn't conveys the truthful reality that Maggie had no choice.

She was unable to scream despite the abusive treatment she was being subjected to.

An additional way Morrison adds introspective thought as Twyla narrates is through the use of dashes. Frequently, the speaker interrupts herself to insert a thought that conveys truth. When Twyla is speaking about her relationship with Roberta she explains that they are “ Two little girls who knew what nobody else in the world knew – how not to ask questions”(10). Both the girls come from difficult home situation and belong to mother’s incapable of caring for them. Instead of asking questions, Roberta and Twyla silently understand each other’s situations. This lack of questions is something that strengthens their friendship, but it also unites them as guilty in regards to the treatment of Maggie. Roberta’s and Twyla’s hesitation to ask questions stops them from understanding Maggie and helping her as she faces abuse and marginalization. Instead of interceding on behalf of a disabled women, they ignore and even support the torment Maggie is subjected to. Another instance where Morrison uses dash to interrupt a thought with a truthful reality is in the sentence “ It was just that I wanted to do it so bad – wanting to is doing it” (19). Roberta is talking about how the older girls in the orphanage would kick and make fun of Maggie, and while Roberta and Twyla never engaged in this, each of them wanted to. Roberta admits that these feelings of malice, even if not backed by action, are equally as damaging as the physical actions Maggie suffered from. Twyla and Roberta did nothing to help Maggie and even mentally encouraged the actions of the other girls. This lack of action proved to be as equally harmful as the older girl’s physical actions. Morrison’s use of punctuation emphasizes key elements in her story. Morrison uses colons in her writing to denote important concepts. When introducing Maggie’s character, Twyla recalls that, “ The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born

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that way: mute”(2). Morrison inserts a colon to separate the word mute from the rest of the sentence. This separation draws attention to the words and introduces the importance of the idea of being mute going forward in the story. Maggie is physically mute, but Twyla and Roberta both feel emotionally mute. This motivates many of the characters actions.

The idea of not being understood is a significant concept in *Recitatif*, and Morrison notes this by allocating the word from the sentence. Morrison uses a colon in a similar way in the sentence, “ Oh Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white”(13). Race is another important topic in Morrison’s short story and this separation of race from the rest of the sentence indicates its significance. Morrison uses direct speech to highlight important dialogue. In particular, she directly quotes questions the characters ask emphasizing the significance of their speech. Morrison’s use of questions to convey theme is particularly interesting because Twyla states multiple times that she and Roberta do not ask questions and that is why they get along well. When Twyla first becomes aware of Maggie’s situation she asks Roberta “ Or what if she wants to cry? Can she cry?” and then questions “ She can’t scream?”(3). These questions are important because they not only expand upon Maggie’s condition, but also reflect the emotions Roberta and Twyla feel. They both take secret satisfaction in Maggie’s inability to express her pain because neither of the girls believe they can express their own pain. Both Roberta and Twyla have been abandoned by the mothers and do not belong to a family. At the same time, the orphans do not accept the girls because they are not true orphans since their parents are still living. Twyla and Roberta have been disowned in every aspect but have no outlet to

express their pain. They are unable to scream and cry just as Maggie is unable to express her torment. Morrison ends her story with a dramatic question further portraying the importance of questions and emphasizing a societal view in overlooking the disabled. At the end of the story, Roberta and Twyla accidentally meet around Christmas time. At the end of their conversation, Roberta sobs, "What the hell happened to Maggie?" (20). The ending forces the characters to face the question they have been avoiding and also emphasizes Morrison's argument that society looks over the people that make them uncomfortable. The use of direct speech communicates the emotion of the moment and increases the pathological argument that society cannot continue ignoring that which it perceives as different.

Toni Morrison creates an interesting tale in which she addresses the problems of race and disability in society. Throughout the story readers are searching to determine which girl is of which race and in doing this makes judgments based on stereotypes. Additionally, Morrison discusses the marginalization of the disabled in society. She suggests that they are overlooked and can sometimes be viewed as not fully human. Morrison portrays the dangers of this thinking and implores readers to ask important questions and defend against prejudice and abuse. *Recitatif* is constructed in a manner that draws importance to communication and understanding, as well as calls attention to the dismissed of society.

## **Work Cited**

Morrison, Toni. "Recitatif" Google, Centricity Domain, 1983, docs.google.com/viewer? a= vπd= sites&srcid=

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