

What happened to  
maggie?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The question of racial issues is a serious challenge even in the modern society as the norms and values which were created many centuries ago are not as easy to overcome as it could be. Toni Morrison in her work *Recitatif* depicts how two girls from completely different social groups become friends in the shelter but how their confrontation appears later in adulthood.

Generally speaking, this short story shows how the perception of reality may be reshaped because of the racial prejudice and how cruelty appears because of the violence everyone faces during his life.

To begin with, the story itself should be summarized in order to understand the plot. Two girls, Roberta and Twyla, were brought to the shelter because their mothers could not take care of them. The beginning of the story itself shows this, “ My mother danced all night and Roberta’s was sick” (Morrison 1). Twyla, the heroine which tells the story, mentions that they both started to communicate because they were outsiders in some way, and got bad marks for all the subjects. The story shows the particular misunderstanding between both friends when Roberta’s mother, seeing that Twyla and her mother are African Americans, refused to shake her mother’s hand. The story progresses to the adulthood when both young women meet on two different borders of their social and racial groups and have very few in common in comparison with their early lives. During their meetings, they both understand that their memory changed some of the facts about Maggie, a mute cook who was the victim of the children’s cruelty in their shelter. Furthermore, Maggie becomes the most significant part of the story as the women reveal a number of details about their own lives, too, and their perception of the world slowly reshapes.

Even more, the critical framework for the analysis of the story must be clarified. One of the best analytical texts regarding this story is written by Shanna Greene Benjamin and it is dedicated to the questions of the race the author raises in *Recitatif*. In particular, the key phrase which outlined the following analysis of the work, is, “ if memory is so unstable, how can blacks and whites ever communicate effectively about the history they share?” (Benjamin 92). This contributes to the idea that the conflict between races and social groups exists, but no one really understands why, and what was the reason, and the modern values are irrational. Such statement develops the thought that Maggie’s life is a synecdoche to the global racial inequality and tragedy. The author claims that Maggie is the symbol of the race itself and that the changing of the memories in the human minds is so vague, then the conflict over race is, too, not clear enough. This leads to the logical assumption that society seriously influences the choices of the people and if cruelty and prejudice could be not the dominant features people often face, then the difference between races could vanish at all. Actually, the author shows that the hatred is senseless, and it has not any exact explanation, that it is completely opposite to the understanding of human beings. This leads the reader to the realization that, perhaps, the world is not divided into two binary oppositions, and that there are so many people who deserve to be loved and respected.

One of the key themes is dedicated to the way prejudice vanishes out of the borders in the community and how the prescribed roles make no sense at all. To specify, the story shows that both Twyla and Roberta were isolated even in their shelter and they were not accepted in the circle of their peers.

Indeed, both girls did not have anything in common at first, but their bad marks and the unpreferable situation of the “ dumped” children contributed to their further cooperation, “ We were the only ones dumped and the only ones with F’s in three classes including gym” (Morrison 3). However, they both forgot about the racial bigotry outside of the shelter because their social statuses did not play any role for they lived in one room and had equal facilities. The first real difference occurs when Roberta’s mother, having Bible in her hand and behaving with a Christian ethos, does not want to take the hand of Twyla’s mother during the first meeting. This shows how the author uses antithesis where there are such things as Christian morale and racial discrimination are put into contrast with each other. In this case, it is created in order to show the bigotry and complete difference between the real meaning of a good person and the hypocrite. With this event, society, again, interrupts the flow of things without racism to which both girls were adjusted. The general mood of the story is tense and dark, mainly emotionally complicated and intensive. It reflects the atmosphere in the American society involved in mutual misunderstanding and unpredictability.

In addition to this, the story reveals the question of children’s cruelty which reflects their own vulnerability. Twyla and Roberta were excluded from the society they lived in, and even twice. At first, their mothers did not want to live with them, both for different reasons, and then the whole shelter does not accept them because their grief and loss are not so great as one of the others’ children who lost their parents. Being bullied by the elder girls, Twyla and Roberta realize that they have no one to tell this about, and observe Maggie as the one who is not protected and even weaker than they are.

When discussing her in the case of a threat, they consider that, “‘ But just tears. No sounds come out.’ ‘ She can’t scream?’ ‘ Nope. Nothing’”, and this reflects their own weakness and inability to protect themselves (Morrison 2). Because of this, they sometimes think they harmed Maggie because they both had a hidden wish of it in order to see someone but not them suffer.

As a consequence, the hatred both girls felt to their mothers developed further, but, still, they continued following the same pattern. In other words, both Twyla and Roberta were ashamed of the fact that their mothers left them, and this fear and pain never left them, being for them a scar for their whole life. Twyla felt that her mother did not pay enough attention to her needs as, “ Mary’s idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo. Hot mashed potatoes and two weenies was like Thanksgiving for me”, and this is a hyperbole which shows her despair (Morrison 2). Despite this, Twyla had the particular common behavioral pattern when she had the son as she even did not pay enough attention to the changing of school for him though this could be a significant problem. As well as this, Roberta was ashamed of her mother’s bigotry, “ I think she was sorry that her mother would not shake my mother’s hand” (Morrison 5). However, when both of them become adults, Roberta behaves typically of a privileged white woman who is not interested in real relations with the African American Twyla and laughed at her during their first meeting.

The argument above leads to the important issue of socialization and the way norms are being taught, not understood. It is evident that the girls became prejudiced due to the society they lived in. Both Twyla and Roberta saw the world from their own perspective, but later on, society became the

key objective for their behavior. Here, the comparison with society as the stage and people as the actors should be drawn. The thing is that Roberta, living in the company of whites who are significantly richer than Twyla's friends and family, saw her own bias as the natural one because of the common conflicts between the whites and blacks. Nevertheless, when Twyla receives such response, she thinks that the time of discrimination has passed and that people of all races cooperate and communicate without any borders. It appears that neither Twyla nor Roberta wanted to be the oppressor, and put the responsibility of their thoughts on the society, and they did not really understand its rules. Though Twyla is more mature from the racial point of view, she hid a secret tendency to violence and self-loss which was revealed to her by Roberta.

Finally, all the mentioned points above depict the real situation of Maggie and gives the response to the question "What happened to Maggie?". Maggie was the woman who wore childish clothes, showing that all the old norms come back as the new ones. Her skin was "sandy-colored" which makes her both the foreign person for the whites and African Americans at one time. Maggie, the woman who could not protect herself, reminded both girls of their mothers who left them, and they could only hate her. Maggie is the symbol of race and lost childhood, and of everything which cannot cry when it is being hurt. Actually, the author uses simile when mentions that Maggie is like Twyla's dancing mother and compares them both in their ignorance. In this case, such comparison is made in order to show the childish inability to analyze, and blindness of the unprotected girl who does not love her mother. Even the easiest details may be trapped in the human

mind. If people cannot remember anything about Maggie, what did they know about themselves and the world they lived in if the memory is so vague? That is why, when Roberta was crying and asking what happened to Maggie, she cried for their lives, too.

To conclude, Toni Morrison writes her story in the dedication to the racial equality and unity which could be overcome. Maggie was a woman with no story, and the facts of her faded in the social dynamics and in the unhappiness of the abandoned children. The story raises the question whether it could be possible to destroy the racial abyss in the community. When talking about the future, who looks in the mirror and thinks about poor defenseless Maggie, the one who hides in everyone's eyes, unable to scream?

## **Works Cited**

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