

Memory and the possibility of reconciliation in "recitatif"



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As humans, we experience hardships, in some cases more drastic than others, over the course of our lives. Subconsciously, we may repress memories depending on the degree to which they physically and/ or emotionally damage us as means to best cope with the situation. Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" shares a story of two girls who found each other in an orphanage and, despite their racial difference, are able to form a bond established upon the nature of their mothers' inability to take care of them. The young girls in this narrative are introduced to parallels of racism and stereotypes throughout their time in the orphanage to when they become young adults. Helene Adams Androne analyzes the protagonists' involvement in traumatic mothering situations as revealing an absence/presence paradigm. From her take away, "characters heal from trauma only when they interrogate and confront the meaning of archetypal figures from their memories" (Androne, 133-134). However, the repression of memories beckons the question of whether confrontation can even occur following the manipulation of a memory. Memory is realized to be a misconstrued perception of not only what has happened in the past, but also provides a link to the present.

Toni Morrison's subtle use of conflicts intertwining man, society, and race help to provide evidence of what happens when someone believes in things that are not in accordance with reality, using Twyla and Roberta as prime examples of the kinds of contorted memories they developed as adolescents that carried into their adult life. Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" opens with a young girl, Twyla, narrating how she and another character, Roberta, had ended up in St. Bonny's Orphanage and how it was not as bad as it seemed.

Being the only ones assigned to room 406, the two went from bed to bed every night for four months, never claiming their own permanent bed. Despite the freedom and friendship they developed within those four walls, they did not have much luck when it came time to interacting with other children at the orphanage. As Twyla puts it, “ we weren’t real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky” (Morrison, 140). Androne notes that “ this initial placement together forecasts Twyla and Roberta’s future interactions, which will always be framed by their racial and class differences; this placement also identifies the connection between them (both have mothers who have abandoned them, rather than mothers who are deceased)” (Androne, 135). Although Twyla and Roberta appear as people very similar to each other during their time together in the orphanage, their separation is imminent. Upon being separated, the two female protagonists not only lose each other, but perhaps their absence from one another leads to distorted representations of memories of events they both experienced.

Alternatively, others interpret this separation or loss of one another as not being based solely upon the distorted representations of memories that both girls experienced. Terry Otten interprets the separation from their close, childlike union at St. Bonny’s as a result of racial encoding. One example of this racial encoding is found in the second encounter that occurs years later at the Howard Johnson’s restaurant where Twyla works. When Twyla reveals that she does not know who Jimi Hendrix is Roberta exclaims, “ Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix, asshole” (Morrison, 145). Otten considers this remark as “ exposing Twyla’s ignorance of the black icon of pop culture”(Otten, 58-64) . The conversation then shifts to the girls inquiring of each other’s mothers, “ the

characters [their mothers] who first expose the girls' racial divide" (Otten, 58-64); it is Twyla who begins this process of confronting the differences between her and Roberta by "stabbing at a common, vulnerable psychological place, forcing Roberta to admit the pain in a grin [that] cracked her whole face" (Androne, 138).

A prominent source of contorted confusion for both Twyla and Roberta are their recollection of Maggie in the orchard, an ambiguous character who, according to other orphans, had her tongue cut out. More than once Maggie is described as the kitchen woman with "legs like parentheses" (Morrison, 141). The comparison of legs to parentheses not only suggests how Maggie is likely handicapped, but also shows that there is information about this character that is excluded from the main point of the story and from other characters as we really do not know much in depth about her. This also contributes to another saying, never judge a book by its cover. It is fair to say that Twyla was judging against Maggie when she said, "even for a mute, it was dumb—dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all" (141). Roberta and Twyla continue to wonder about Maggie, but talk about her without truly knowing who she is. For example, Twyla asks if Maggie could cry if she wanted to, to which Roberta responds "Sure. But just tears. No sound comes out," harshly emphasizing the already known fact that Maggie cannot scream and perhaps she cannot hear, which would also hinder her ability to speak (141). They then try to get Maggie's attention by yelling out offensive names like "Dummy!" and "Bow legs!" (141).

Otten remarks that the orchard where this interaction between Maggie and the other characters takes place is where Twyla and Roberta "realize, where <https://assignbuster.com/memory-and-the-possibility-of-reconciliation-in-recitatif/>

they lose their innocence, and where in their silence they participate conjointly in a willful, if unwitting, violation. (Otten, 58-64). In this same sense Maggie represents the girls' own lost innocence; they are not much different from her, in fact all three character's surroundings appear to be in opposition of them. Yet, it is not innocence that truly binds them, but guilt as Otten reveal for which it also the first account of culpability [from Twyla] in the orchard.

For Maggie, Androne attributes language, myth, and imagery as archetypal figures of this character wherein Twyla and Roberta revise their perception and later memories of her in order to “ transfer their anxieties and anger toward their mothers onto her” (Androne, 134). In that moment it dawns on Twyla that maybe they were wrong, and that Maggie could hear anything and everything, but she just never let on to it. Like their respective mothers, Maggie's silence provides an apparent representation of the shared experience of alienation and rejection that Twyla and Roberta feel from their mothers that frustrates them. Androne associates Twyla and Roberta's ineffectiveness of dealing directly with their maternal realities of absence and presence as rationale for Maggie functioning as the “ intersection of their identities and their desire to revise their pasts to explain their present life” (Androne, 137).

When evaluating the absence/presence paradigm we see in the opening scene of the story how it is briefly mentioned that Twyla's mother was a dancer and Roberta's mother was sick, both of which serve as the reason for their absence. As readers, we can only infer what those labels actually mean for both mothers. Based on the context, Twyla's mother can be interpreted <https://assignbuster.com/memory-and-the-possibility-of-reconciliation-in-recitatif/>

as an exotic dancer or one who is not fully dedicated to motherhood, either emotionally or financially, to take care of Twyla. We can also infer this from the type of clothing she had on- green slacks that made her behind stick out and a fur coat, all the while “[she] was still grinning because she’s not too swift when it comes to what’s really going on” (Morrison, 143). Referring to Twyla’s mother as someone who “ dances all night” is a way of saying she was not in tune with reality and her surroundings, the most evident example being the daughter she could not care for (Morrison, 142). For Roberta’s mother, it is not as clear as to what type of sickness she has. When her character is introduced, she is described as a big or really tall woman, with the biggest cross Twyla had ever seen across her chest and in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made (143). Perhaps Roberta’s mother carries around this Bible and reads scriptures to Roberta as a belief that she will one day get better, and that God has a plan for her life. However, given the frequency that Roberta is in the orphanage, she may not believe in her mother preaching such well wishes. When Roberta’s mother was introduced to Mary, she looked Mary and Twyla up and down and then stepped out of the line with Roberta. It could be inferred that the type of sickness attached to the mother was really not a sickness at all, but something deeper, perhaps a strong religious affiliation or affliction.

Within this time frame of being introduced to Roberta’s mother, something that stood out to me as symbolic was food. For lunch Roberta’s mother had brought chicken legs, ham sandwiches, oranges, and a whole box of chocolate-covered grahams. Notwithstanding the bulk of choices Roberta had to choose from she chose to only drink milk from a thermos. It would

seem as though the dismissed food was symbolic for something else that Roberta didn't want—to see her mom sick or even worse to see her possibly believing she might get better. Also, even though we are not entirely sure which character is black and which one is white we understand that there arises a conflict between these two mothers whether it's based off of race or the difference in how each of them carries [appearance wise] themselves. Similarly Twyla mentions, “ Things are not right. The wrong food is always with the wrong people” (Morrison, 143). Twyla could have been alluding to the struggles amongst opposite racial groups where some receive different sets of privileges, leading her to form this conclusion.

In light of alluding to struggles amongst racial groups, years later when Twyla and Roberta convene at a grocery store they engage in some old memories they shared together, one of which included Maggie and the day she fell down in the orchard. Roberta's memory of how Maggie had fallen was due to the gar girls pushing her down and tearing her clothes. Twyla, however, does not remember it happening this way at all, but that she fell on her own. Roberta's response to Twyla asking if she was fine was, “ You've blocked it, Twyla. It happened” (Morrison, 149). In this case we see that Roberta is insistent on convincing Twyla that this happened the way she said it did. Once more we delve into the realm of race when Roberta responds to Twyla's assumption of [her] acting as if she did not want to know her or be friends with her back at Howard Johnson's by saying, “ you know how it was in those days: black—white. You know how everything was” (149). From this context it is evident that Roberta distinguishes people as two separate and unequal entities. Twyla remembers that time period as nothing short of

inclusive wherein there were busloads of blacks and whites who came into Howard Johnson's together and were amiable towards one another. Fast-forwarding a couple months later, the scene opens up with Roberta picketing for her children to stay in the neighborhood rather than going to a different school. In this moment Roberta and Twyla find themselves in an argument surrounding the perceived belief that they live in a free country for which Twyla counters that by saying, "not yet, but it will be" (Morrison, 150). This is followed by the two's back-and-forth puzzlement of "I wonder what made me think you were different" (150). The dialogue in this portion of the story helps to re-instate the given claim that beliefs not in accordance with reality can lead to confrontation of opposing perspectives.

The inability to come to a concrete conclusion leads the two to form accusations against one another. Out of anger Roberta says to Twyla, "Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You kicked a black lady [referring to Maggie] and you have the nerve to call me a bigot" (Morrison, 151). Again it is never clarified in the story what race these characters are, but we only know that Maggie is sandy-colored, but that's about it. It is later brought to the light by Roberta that she really did think that Maggie was black and because she could not talk she thought she was crazy. It is revealed to us that similar to Maggie, Roberta's mother had been brought up in an institution and how she [Roberta] thought she would be too. This brings me back to my earlier point of maybe the sickness her mother had was due to a strong religious affiliation or affliction. She also confesses to Twyla that she was right, and it was in fact the gar girls who kicked her, even though she had wanted so badly to have done it. By the end the two are able to set

aside their fallacies on other people, races, and society as a whole and finally see the reality of things and taking time to recognize Maggie, wondering—whatever happened to her.

Work Cited

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