

Toni Morrison: Recreating the Master Narrative

An Essay by Dr. Brenda M. Greene

Toni Morrison sits on the stage at the 92nd Street Y, regal in her stature, her beautifully gray woven locks cascading down her back, a statue of self-containment, the embodiment of years of wisdom and storytelling, a master griot of the written word. We who sit in the audience, many of whom have been seduced by her novels, feel blessed, in awe and simply grateful to be in the presence of this great writer, the only living American Nobel Laureate in Literature. When the facilitator asks her to comment on the significance and value of writing her most recent novel, *A Mercy*, cited by the *New York Times* as one of the most notable books in 2008, Morrison responds that “Re-imagining the past in this country and the place of African Americans in the narrative adds a layer of history to this country.”

Morrison’s response draws us back to what she so eloquently articulates in her book of critical essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992): The American narrative has chronicled and presented the stories of African Americans as “other,” yet the story of America cannot be told without integrating the African-American experience into this American master narrative. In other words, the African-American experience is inextricably linked to the American narrative.

The African-American narrative is well known, as documented in the novels, short stories, poems, and essays depicting the African-American experience in this country; however, as Charles Johnson notes in his essay “The End of the Black American Narrative,” the traditional African-American narrative is too often depicted as a story of victimization. Johnson informs us that:

This unique black American narrative, which emphasizes the experience of victimization, is quietly in the background of every conversation we have about black people, even when it is not fully articulated or expressed. It is our starting point, our agreed-upon premise, our most important presupposition for dialogues about black America.

Johnson's premise is riveting in that it exemplifies the premise of many African-American texts; however, Morrison's texts move beyond the experience of victimization and encompass themes that represent a range of the body of work in American literature. Her novels cause us to question and critique the master narrative that emanates from the American literary canon.

In Kevin Nance's essay on Toni Morrison in *Poets & Writers* (November/December 2008) Nikky Finney notes that Morrison's "narratives arc the whole American experience..." (50) *A Mercy*, a novel that expands the master narrative to include "the other," clearly illustrates Morrison's artistic ability to broaden our understanding of American history and culture. In this novel, she crosses the boundaries of race and reveals the complexity of the race, class, and ethnic divisions that characterized American culture as far back as the 1700s and still persist today.

This narrative takes us on a journey to colonial America and portrays the interconnectedness of African-Americans (enslaved and free), Europeans (immigrant whites and indentured servants), and Native Americans (enslaved and free) who, during the late 17th century (before the reality of race as the defining element of our country, forbid blacks to gather), coexisted in communities that resisted the gentry. We enter into a world represented by diverse groups of people who collaboratively face the challenges of living in a natural and virgin environment that is constrained by the political and economic forces of distant European-controlled governments.

Morrison thus situates us in the interior lives of the immigrant, the Native American and the African. We experience the lives of immigrants who cross the ocean in search of a dream of a better life and future, and who upon landing in America feel displaced and are faced with the tensions between the dream and the reality. We face the trauma and suffering of Native Americans, dispossessed of their land and forced into an involuntary migration. Throughout the novel, we empathize with the lives of Africans, who, stripped of their language and culture and brought to this country against their will, attempt to survive despite methods to eradicate their family, traditions and humanity. And we observe how Morrison weaves the moral issues associated with these themes of loss and betrayal throughout the novel.

A Mercy, in providing a complex rendering of the African-American experience in America and hence a complex rendering of the American narrative, is also a critique of the factors that combine to create what Mary Louise Pratt defines as a “contact zone.” A contact zone is a space where unequal groups that have been affected by social, political, economic, and historical forces come together to shape a critical moment in time.

These moments in time in Morrison’s novel include: colonialism (the renaming of Angola as Portugal); imperialism (the battle for land in the name of the King and religion); greed (the Europes whose “...destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples.” (54); the peculiar institution of slavery (the commodification of enslaved peoples); cultural memory (the importance of preserving one’s culture and its impact on the present and future); and religious hypocrisy (those who practice religion and engage in the sale of “human cargo”).

In creating a narrative that explores these themes, Morrison captures the essence of what it means to live in a world that is blended with African, European and Native American cultures, and provides us with the perspective of those whose voices

have been silenced, marginalized, and depicted in stereotypical ways. Through the narratives of her characters, we come to know what it was like for those Europeans who came to this country in search of an opportunity to raise their economic and class status or to escape prison, prostitution, poverty and/or religious persecution. We observe the special burden that women across ethnicity and race undergo as they assume the tasks of wife, mother, guardian, family stabilizer, healer, and servant. We take note of those who engage in the hypocrisy of the “human cargo,” while they work to ensure that their families live in luxury and opulence, and overindulge in various “comforts” of life. We discern the corruption and greed in the enslaving of Native Americans, and the ways in which their lands are taken from them. All of these forces coalesce to provide a context for expanding our perception of the historical, economic, and racial forces that shaped American history and literary texts.

Toni Morrison is a masterful storyteller who deliberately takes time to craft each word and sentence, and provides the reader with major characters, story line and theme in the first chapter. We initially enter the mind of the first person narrator, Florens, the enslaved girl-woman (in the tradition of Morrison's *Beloved*), who cautions us not to be afraid, for although she has come back from her mission and lies weeping, she is telling a story that will not hurt the reader.

Florens returns, emotionally drained, from a quest to find her love, a handsome blacksmith, an African who has never been enslaved, one whose name we are not given, a man who is both a symbol for those free men who have resisted being named by others, and for those whom have crossed the Atlantic and survived the New World order of slavery that is thrust upon them. She introduces us to Reverend Father, “the only kind man I ever see”(8), the one who teaches Florens and her mother letters; and the one who brings her North to her new master (for her mother has given her up in

order to ensure her survival). We meet her new “Master,” Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch trader, and her “Mistress,” Rebekka, from England, who has crossed the ocean to marry and escape abject poverty; they introduce her to Lina, her Native American guardian and protector who draws upon her cultural memories to help Florens understand the world. And, we meet another child-woman on Jacob’s farm, Sorrow, the strange red-haired, black-teethed inept servant who is constantly with child, but who is destined to bear babies that will not live. Thus, this first chapter begins with Florens’s reflections and questioning of the circumstances that have brought her to this state of affairs, and provides the context for the world of people in which she comes of age.

Because cultural signs are important elements in the novels of Morrison, they serve as guides for the journey that she provides for the reader and impact and shape her characters’ responses to certain situations. Florens’ story is symbolic of what occurs when cultural signs are ignored and the memories of the past are not inscribed in one’s consciousness and social being.

In recounting her story, Florens reflects on her inability to read the signs that foreshadow the events that unfold. Her current plight is the result of her ignoring of these signs. As readers, we witness a young woman, who in believing that she has found love and lost it, declares that “...I will never unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth....” The result is an obsession and a loss of part of herself. Florens does not heed the warning of Lina, who, in trying to enlighten her, conveys a warning that: “You are one leaf on his tree....”

Instead, she responds with “No, I am his tree.”

Nor does she understand the meaning of Lina’s advice when a group of sparrows suddenly descend upon a gathering of trees and just as suddenly disappear. Lina points to Florens and reminds her: “We never shape the world. The world shapes us.”

A guide and wise elder who possess knowledge that has been passed down from her ancestors, Lina has witnessed the mass execution of people in her village, and she carries within her memories of death, destruction, and shame. In her words, the "...shame of having survived the destruction of her families shrank with her vow never to betray or abandon anyone she cherished."

Thus, she cherishes Florens and is her protector and nurturer. Florens, in ignoring Lina's wisdom as well as the natural and cultural signs that signify that she is obsessed and out of control, ultimately suffers and is left an emotionally wrecked young woman. Her desire and search for love are natural longings indicative of the human experience that all seek, but they are unattainable and doomed in a cultural environment that is based on the enslavement of others.

Florens, from the beginning of the narrative, resists the restrictions imposed on her as a young, enslaved girl. Desiring and desperate for shoes, shoes that her mother reminds her are for those who are free from the travail of everyday work, in short, for those whose lives are not characteristic of a slave, Florens embodies one who will not be bound by the constrictions of slavery. She does not comprehend that shoes will protect the soles of her feet, but will not prepare her for the realities of her existence. Her wearing of shoes thus becomes a foreshadowing of her vulnerability and her inability to "survive" the vestiges of slavery.

Lina, her guardian and protector, reaffirms her mother's warning and informs her that her feet are useless because of their tenderness from the wearing of shoes; however, Florens, in choosing not to heed the messages she has received, never develops the toughness that is needed to survive the harsh and deplorable conditions of slavery.

We are also reminded of Morrison's novel *Beloved* in Florens' story, for Morrison calls to our memory those women who sacrificed their children in order to save them,

those who threw their children overboard during the Middle Passage and those who in understanding the vulnerability and the inability of their offspring to protect themselves, made choices that they considered the lesser of two evils. Florens's mother is one such person who gives her daughter away to a man who appears not "to want," as she remembers her own life and reflects on the plight of her daughter:

"I don't know who is your father...They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below."

That evening at the Y, Morrison was asked to comment on her writing process; She describes how her first challenge in writing is to establish the setting or place, by developing a landscape that will be etched in the mind of the reader. This process involves extensive research on multiple levels; she spent several years, for example, researching the geography, architecture, historical elements, and artifacts for *A Mercy*. Her poetic depiction of the setting in this novel paints a vivid and stirring image of the shoreline and sky that Jacob encounters as he travels north.

"Walking in the warm night air, he went as far as possible, until the alehouse lights were gem stones fighting darkness and the voices of carousing men were lost to the silk-rustle of surf. The sky had forgotten completely its morning fire and was tricked out in cool stars on a canvas smooth and dark as Regina's hide. He gazed at the occasional dapple of starlight on the water, then bent down and placed his hands in it. Sand moved under his palms; infant waves died above his wrists, soaking the cuffs of his sleeves."

Once the landscape is completed, she can then enter the minds of her characters and create the language that evokes her characters' sensibilities and experiences.

Morrison crafts intergenerational, multilayered texts that nourish and help us to enter into the interior lives of her characters, empathize with their needs, desires, pain and suffering, and participate in specific historical moments in time. She causes us to interrogate the master American narrative, and to move forward in the creation of new memories that explore and portray a more complex American narrative.

Works Cited

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