Recitatif Study Guide

Recitatif by Toni Morrison

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Introduction

"Recitatif" is the only published short story by luminary African-American novelist Toni Morrison. It appeared in a 1983 anthology of writing by African-American women entitled *Confirmation,* edited by Amiri and Amina Baraka. "Recitatif" tells the story of the conflicted friendship between two girls—one black and one white—from the time they meet and bond at age eight while staying at an orphanage through their re-acquaintance as mothers on different sides of economic, political, and racial divides in a recently gentrified town in upstate New York.

While Morrison typically writes about black communities from an inside perspective, in this story she takes a different approach. The story explores how the relationship between the two main characters is shaped by their racial difference. Morrison does not, however, disclose which character is white and which is black. Rather than delving into the distinctive culture of African Americans, she illustrates how the divide between the races in American culture at large is dependent on blacks and whites defining themselves in opposition to one another. Her use of description and characterization in the story underscores the readers' complicity in this process. Morrison has considered similar issues in her book of criticism, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination,* which explores how language enforces stereotypes in the work of classic American authors such as Melville, Poe, and Hemingway. "Recitatif" may therefore be understood as part of Morrison's ongoing response to the mostly white and male classic literary tradition of the United States.

Author Biography

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford to George and Rahmah Wofford in 1931. The second of four children, Morrison was raised in the small Ohio town of Lorain in a tight-knit black community. Morrison describes her father, a shipyard welder, as a racist. Having experienced virulent racism, he despised whites. Her mother, on the other hand, was an integrationist. Both of her parents and her larger community instilled in Morrison a strong sense of self-esteem and cultural identity.

Though she had no aspirations of being a writer in her youth, Morrison was always an avid reader and a precocious student. Her imagination was further nourished by the folk stories passed down from her parents and grandmother. She attended Lorain High School and went on to Howard University, a historically black college. There she studied English and drama and came to be known as Toni. In 1955 Morrison earned a master's degree in English from Cornell University and began a teaching career. She married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, and they had two sons, Harold and Slade.

Morrison's writing career began at age 30 when, feeling unfulfilled, she joined an informal writer's group. Morrison drafted a short story about a black girl who wished she had blue eyes. She had never written fiction or poetry before. This story was the seed of her first novel, *The Bluest Eye,* which she published nine years later. In the interim, Morrison divorced her husband and left teaching, moving to New York for a career in editing. As an editor at Random House she fostered the careers of some of the most important black female writers of her generation. After the appearance of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, Morrison continued to write prolifically, with great popular and critical success. She is the author of seven novels, a play, and a work of literary criticism. "Recititaf" is her only published work of short fiction. Since 1987 she has focused mainly on writing but has also taught classes at Yale and Princeton Universities.

Morrison is one of the most loved and respected writers of the late twentieth century. Several of her books have been bestsellers and she is the recipient of a number of prestigious literary awards. In 1993 Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, becoming the first African American to win this honor.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a description of "St. Bonny's" or St. Bonaventure, the shelter where Twyla, the narrator, meets Roberta, the story's other main character, when they are both eight years old. Twyla recalls that her mother once told her that people of Roberta's race smell funny, and she objects to being placed in a room with Roberta on the grounds that her mother wouldn't approve. Twyla, however, soon finds Roberta understanding and sympathetic to her situation. While most children at the shelter are orphans, Twyla is there because her mother "dances all night" and Roberta is there because her mother is sick. Roberta and Twyla are isolated from the other children at St. Bonny's and are scared of the older girls, so they stick together.

Twyla remembers St. Bonny's orchard in particular but she doesn't know why it stands out in her memory. She recounts an incident in which Maggie, a mute woman who worked at St. Bonny's kitchen, fell down in the orchard and the big girls laughed at her. Twyla reports that she and Roberta did nothing to help her. They called her names and she ignored them, perhaps because she was deaf, but Twyla thinks not and, looking back, she is ashamed.

Twyla and Roberta's mother come to visit one Sunday. The girls are excited and get dressed up to meet them at church services. Twyla is embarrassed by Mary, her mother, because of her casual appearance, but also proud that she is so pretty. When Roberta attempts to introduce her mother to Twyla and Mary, her mother refuses to address them or to shake Mary's extended hand, presumably because of racial prejudice. Mary says "That bitch!" right there in the chapel and further embarrasses Twyla by groaning during the service. Roberta's mother wears a huge cross and carries a large Bible. Afterward, Mary and Twyla eat Easter candy, since Mary has brought no lunch for them, while Roberta can't finish the food her mother brought. Not long after, Roberta leaves St. Bonny's.

Twyla doesn't see Roberta again for many years. Twyla is now a waitress, and Roberta comes in to the Howard Johnson's where she works. Ro-berta is with two men and tells Twyla that they are on their way to see Jimi Hendrix, but Twyla doesn't know who Hendrix is. Roberta dismisses Twyla and calls her an asshole. Twyla responds by asking about Roberta's mother and cattily reports that her own is still "pretty as a picture."

Tywla's narration picks up again when she is 28 years old and married. She describes her home, husband, and family life. Newburgh, the rundown town where they live, has recently become gentrified, and there is a new mall at the edge of town where Twyla goes one day to shop at a gourmet supermarket. There she runs into Roberta, now married to a wealthy executive, for the first time since their hostile encounter at Howard Johnson's. Roberta greets Twyla warmly and asks her to a coffee. They laugh and the tension between them seems to dissolve. As they are reminiscing, the incident with Maggie comes up. Roberta claims that Maggie didn't fall down in the orchard, but that the big girls had knocked her down. This is not what Twyla remembers and she starts to

feel uncomfortable. She asks Roberta about their encounter at Howard John-son's and Roberta answers, "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white." They part ways, promising to keep in touch.

That fall racial tension descends on Newburgh as a result of busing, instituted to ensure integration in the schools. Twyla's son Joseph is one of the children who has to take a bus to a school in a different area. Twyla is driving near the school Joseph will attend and sees Roberta picketing against busing. Twyla stops and they discuss the issue. They argue and soon the group of picketers surrounds Twyla's car and start rocking it; Twyla reaches out to Roberta for help, but Roberta does nothing. Police finally come to Twyla's aid. Just before she pulls away, Roberta approaches her and calls her "the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground." Twyla responds that Maggie wasn't black and that Roberta is a liar. Roberta responds that she is the liar and that they had both kicked Maggie.

Twyla begins to stand on a picket line holding up slogans that respond directly to Roberta's. Over the course of the six weeks that the schools are closed due to the controversy, Twyla's signs become more personal, with slogans like, "Is your mother well?"

Twyla and Roberta have no interactions for a long time, but Twyla remains preoccupied with what Roberta said about Maggie. She knows that she didn't kick her, but she is perplexed about the question of whether the "sandy-colored" woman might have been black. One night she runs into Roberta, who is coming out of an elegant party at a downtown hotel. She approaches Twyla and says she has something she has to tell her. She admits that they had never kicked Maggie but says that she really did think that she was black. She confesses to having wanted to kick her and "wanting to is doing it." Roberta's eyes fill up with tears. Twyla thanks her and tells her, "My mother, she never did stop dancing." Roberta answers that hers never got well and begins to cry hard, asking "What the hell happened to Maggie?"

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

The narrator of *Recitatif* is a woman named Twyla who recalls her stay at an orphanage when she was eight years old. The story traces Twyla's encounters with her roommate, Roberta, at St. Bonaventure orphanage over the course of twenty years. In the story's opening, the narrator explains that she has been placed in the orphanage because her mother dances all night. Roberta has been placed there because her mother is sick. Twyla says that St. Bonny's was not so bad. Other shelters, like Bellevue for instance, house hundreds of children in one large room. St. Bonny's housed four children to a room. At the time that Twyla and Roberta stay there, there is a shortage of state kids so they are the only two in their room. For the four months that the two girls stay at St. Bonny's they switch beds nightly. They never claim a permanent bed as their own.

The day that Twyla arrives at St. Bonny's, a woman, whom the girls call Big Bozo, introduces them to each other and gets them settled into their room. Twyla doesn't want to room with Roberta at first because she is white. Twyla comments that once and awhile her mother stops dancing for long enough to tell her something important. When Twyla meets Roberta, she remembers her mother telling her that white people never wash their hair and smell funny. Twyla says Roberta smells funny. When Big Bozo introduces the two girls, Twyla says that her mother won't like that she is putting her there. Big Bozo says that is a good thing because than perhaps Twyla's mother will come get her out soon. Roberta misinterprets this statement. She thinks that Twyla means that her mother will be angry that her daughter is in a shelter. Roberta asks Twyla if her mother is sick too. Twyla says no, she just likes to dance all night. Roberta nods her head, understanding. Twyla likes that Roberta catches on quickly. The other kids at the shelter call Twyla and Roberta "salt and pepper" because Twyla is black and Roberta is white.

Both of the girls are eight years old. They both are failing school. Roberta is failing because she can't read and doesn't even listen to what the teacher says. Twyla is failing because she can't remember what she reads or what the teacher says. Twyla says that Roberta is not good at anything except playing jacks. Although Roberta and Twyla don't like each other at first they stick together because no one else wants to play with them, since they are not real orphans.

The narrator says that the other kids have "beautiful dead parents in the sky," whereas Roberta and Twyla are dumped at the shelter. The New York state shelter is filled with children from all cultures and backgrounds. Twyla is grateful that at least they get proper meals; her mother's idea of dinner is popcorn and Yoo-Hoo. Roberta doesn't like the food and lets Twyla finish whatever she doesn't want. The only bad thing about the shelter is that the older girls from the second floor push Twyla and Roberta around once in a while. Some of the big girls are as old as sixteen. They are mostly scared runaways or teens that have been thrown out of their houses. The staff tries to keep them

separated from the younger children. Roberta and Twyla watch the girls dance to their radios in the orchard. When the older girls catch the younger girls watching them they pull their hair and twist their arms. Roberta and Twyla are both scared of the older girls but they don't want each other to know this. They make a list of dirty names to call back to the girls in the orchard as they run away from them.

The orchard is filled with hundreds of apple trees. The trees are bare on the day that Twyla arrives at the shelter. By the time she leaves the shelter, the trees are covered white flowers. Twyla dreams of the orchard often but she doesn't know why because nothing much ever happens there.

One time Maggie, one of the kitchen women, falls down in the orchard. The older girls laugh at her. Twyla and Roberta don't try to help or call for help. Maggie is an older woman. She is dumb and deaf. She has crooked legs that cause her to rock and sway as she walks. She works the early morning shift until two o'clock, or two-fifteen if she is late starting work. When she finishes work at two-fifteen she cuts through the orchard to catch her bus but usually misses it and has to wait another hour for the next one. She wears a hat with earflaps on it as a child would wear.

Twyla wonders if Maggie can cry or yell if someone attacks her. Roberta says that Maggie can cry but she would make no sound. She also says that Maggie would not be able to scream. Twyla yells at Maggie, calling her "dummy" and "bowlegs" to see if the woman can hear her. Maggie doesn't turn around. Twyla imagines that Maggie can hear her but she doesn't let on that she can. Afterward Twyla feels ashamed because she realizes that if Maggie did hear her she can't tell on her to anyone.

As time passes, Twyla and Roberta begin to get along. The day before Maggie falls in the orchard the girls find out that their mothers are coming to visit them on Sunday. They have both been in the shelter for twenty-eight days. Their mothers will arrive at ten in the morning. They will go to chapel together and then have lunch with them in the teacher's lounge. Twyla thinks it will be good for both of their mothers to meet each other. On Sunday, after breakfast, the girls watch the road from the window. The girls curl each other's hair. Roberta's socks are still wet. She washes them the night before and leaves them hanging on the radiator. Twyla thinks her socks are pretty. They have pink scalloped tops. Both girls have a purple Easter basket they made out of construction paper in craft class. The baskets are filled with jellybeans. Bozo enters the room. She tells the girls they look nice and says it's time to come downstairs. When Twyla gets up, she drops the jellybeans from her basket on the floor. She races to put them back and Bozo escorts the girls to the first floor. The other girls downstairs are lined up for chapel. Adult visitors stand on one side of the room. Some of these visitors are potential adopters, all of whom are frightening. A few of the girls have their grandmothers visiting. None of the children has young visitors. If they had young relatives, they wouldn't be "real orphans."

Mary, Twyla's mother, is wearing the green slacks that Twyla hates because they make her butt stick out. She also wears a ratty fur jacket with ripped pocket linings. Twyla is embarrassed because her mother doesn't know they are going to chapel and is dressed

inappropriately. Mary waves eagerly, as though she is the child, not the mother. Twyla walks toward her slowly, carrying the basket and hoping it will not break. Mary squeezes Twyla and squashes the basket and candy inside. She says, "Twyla Baby." Twyla knows that the older girls are sure to make fun of her for this. Twyla is so embarrassed she says she could have killed her. As her mother continues to hug her Twyla's anger ceases. She thinks a pretty mom on earth is better then a beautiful dead one in the sky, even if Mary does leave her alone to go dancing.

Roberta taps Twyla on the shoulder and introduces her mother, then introduces her mother to Mary. Roberta's mother is a large, towering woman who is wearing a huge cross and is carrying an enormous Bible. Mary smiles as she tries to shake Roberta's mother's hand. Roberta's mother looks down at Twyla and Mary and quickly leads her daughter to the back of the chapel line. Mary realizes what just happened and says, "That bitch."

In chapel, everyone stares at Mary after she swears. She fidgets during the service and groans in boredom. She refuses to read along with the sermon or sign the hymns. Twyla reiterates that she could have killed her. The ordeal brings a smug look back to the "real orphans'" faces. Mary also forgot to bring a lunch so she and Twyla eat the smashed jellybeans. Roberta's mother packed a large lunch and she reads the Bible to her daughter as they eat. Like always, Roberta doesn't eat much. Twyla says that the wrong food is always matched with the wrong people. She believes this is what got her into waitressing work later on, to match the right food with the right people.

After the mothers leave, Roberta shares the graham crackers her mother brought with Twyla.

Roberta leaves St. Bonny's in May when the apple trees had begun to bloom with flowers. On the last day the girls go out to the orchard to watch the older girls smoke. Twyla is worried about Big Bozo's plans to move another girl into her room. Roberta promises to write to Twyla everyday, which Twyla thinks is a sweet gesture since Roberta can't read or write. Twyla wants to mail drawings to Roberta but doesn't get her address. When Twyla thinks of Roberta in later years, she can only remember the wet socks with pink scalloped edges.

Years later Twyla works behind the counter at a Howard Johnson's. She doesn't mind the job but it's a long ride from where she lives in Newburgh. She works the second night shift, from eleven at night to seven in the morning. It is pretty dead until the greyhound stops in for breakfast at six-thirty. The place looks better at night. Twyla prefers it when the sun shines in, even though it reveal how run down the place is. One morning Twyla spots Roberta at a booth in her the Howard Johnson restaurant. She is sitting with two boys that have long hair and scruffy facial hair. Roberta's hair is so big that Twyla can barely see her face but she recognizes her eye right away. Roberta is wearing a powder blue halter and shorts. She has huge earrings and more makeup than the older girls in the orchard at St. Bonny's did.

Twyla is stuck at the counter until seven but she watches the booth to make sure that Roberta doesn't leave before her shift is over. When Twyla's replacement shows up, she walks over to Roberta's booth and says hello. She wonders if Roberta will recognize her or if she has tried to block St. Bonny's out of her mind. Roberta does remember Twyla. She asks if Twyla works there. Twyla says yes and explains that she lives nearby in Newburgh. Roberta laughs and the boys that she sits with laugh along with her. Twyla feels uncomfortable so she laughs too. Roberta lights a cigarette and says that they are on their way to the coast. One of the boys that she is with has an appointment with Hendrix. Roberta makes fun of Twyla for not knowing who Jimi Hendrix is. Twyla feels dismissed. She asks Roberta how her mother is doing. Roberta grins and says she's fine. She asks Twyla how her mother is doing. Twyla says she is as pretty as a picture and then she turns away form the booth.

Several more years pass after this encounter. Twyla is married to a fireman named James. She likes his big loud family and feels comfortable with them as well as with him. His family has lived in Newburgh all their lives. They remember it for the flourishing town it used to be. Years later, the wealthy families have moved away to Annandale, a wealthy neighborhood nearby. Squatters and high-risk renters have ruined the once magnificent houses in the old neighborhood. Half of the town's population is on welfare. Twyla and James have a son named Joseph. One day in late June, Twyla drives out to the new mall at the edge of town to shop at a gourmet grocery store. As she shops, she feels guilty about making such extravagant purchases. Someone calls out her name while she is in the checkout line. Twyla doesn't recognize the stranger at first then she realizes that it is Roberta. Roberta asks her to meet her outside after they are finished paying for their groceries. Outside Roberta tells Twyla that she lives nearby in Annandale.

In contrast to last time Twyla saw her, Roberta is nicely dressed and has smooth, sleek hair. Twyla asks how she ended up in Annandale. Roberta says she has been there a year. Her husband lives there. He is a widower with four kids who works in computers. Twyla tells her that she has a son. Roberta asks Twyla to have coffee and Twyla accepts. Twyla notices that Roberta has a driver and a dark blue limo. She has two servants also. Twyla jokes with her by saying, if only Big Bozo could see you now. Twelve years ago, they were strangers in the coffee shop. Now they both giggle and all of a sudden, their four months together twenty years ago comes rushing back. Although they spent a short time together, it meant something that they were both there together. They were two girls who knew no one else in the world. They sit down at a booth. Twyla asks Roberta if she ever learned to read. Roberta reads her the menu to show that she did. They recall the Easter baskets and how they tried to introduce their mothers and both laugh. Twyla asks what happened with Hendrix. She says she thought of her when he died. Roberta jokes with Twyla saying that she finally learned who Hendrix was.

Roberta asks if Twyla remembers the day the older girls pushed Maggie down in the orchard. Twyla doesn't remember. She remembers Maggie falling, not having been pushed. Roberta mentions when Big Bozo was fired. Twyla doesn't remember this either. Roberta explains that Twyla wasn't there when it happened. Roberta had been sent back to St. Bonny's. She stayed a year when she was ten and another two months

when she was fourteen then she ran away. Twyla is shocked that she ran away. Roberta says she couldn't be like the other big girls in the orchard. Twyla asks if she is sure about Maggie. Roberta says Twyla must have blocked it out.

Twyla wants to go home. Roberta can't just pretend that everything is better. She doesn't even apologize for snubbing her at the Howard Johnson's. Twyla asks if Roberta was on drugs that day. Roberta says maybe a little bit, although she didn't do drugs much. Twyla says she acted as if she didn't want to know her. Roberta responds by saying they both know how things were those days. People had racist attitudes and they would think badly of them if they saw them together. Twyla's experience was the opposite. She saw black and white people come into Howard Johnson's together all the time. During that time musicians, protesters and and friends of different races all traveled together. The two women walk to Roberta's car. Roberta's driver helps Twyla put her groceries in her station wagon. Roberta tells Twyla to keep in touch but Twyla knows she will not call Roberta. Once Roberta is in her limo, she calls out the window, asking Twyla if her mother ever stopped dancing. Twyla says no. She asks Roberta if her mother ever got well. Roberta says no, she didn't.

What the papers call racial strife affects Newburgh and its surrounding communities in autumn. Twyla's son Joseph is on a list of children who will be forced to change schools. He will take the bus to a far away junior high school this year. Twyla thinks it is a good thing until she hears differently. To her all schools are dumpy; there is no difference between any of them in her eyes. While driving past one of the schools one afternoon, Twyla sees women marching outside. Roberta is among them. She is holding a sign that says, "Mothers have rights too." Twyla slows her car down. Roberta sees her and waves. Twyla doesn't wave back but Roberta approaches the car anyway. Roberta is picketing the fact that her kids are being sent to another school, she explains to Twyla. Twyla says that Joseph is being moved too. However, she says it shouldn't matter. They argue over whether the children should be forced to change schools.

As the fighting increases, Roberta reminds Twyla that she used to curl her hair, acknowledging their history. Twyla says she hated Roberta's hands in her hair. The women who were in the picket line surround Twyla's car and begin to rock it back and forth. Like the old days in the orchard, Twyla reaches for Roberta's hand by instinct. Roberta just stands there and looks at Twyla. A police officer strolls over and tells the women to get back on the line or off the street. They leave but Roberta stands there motionless. Roberta says that Twyla hasn't changed. She accuses her of having been the one to push down Maggie and kick her. She calls Twyla a bigot because she says that Maggie was a helpless old black woman. Twyla says Maggie wasn't black and she never pushed or kicked her. Roberta says they both did. Twyla calls her a liar. Roberta turns away and Twyla drives off.

The next morning Twyla goes into her garbage and makes a sign in response that says children have rights too. She was going to tack it up near the picket line but when she arrives, there is another group of women, protesting the picketers. She marches with this second group. Twyla returns to the picket line for six weeks. When Roberta doesn't acknowledge that she is there Twyla make meaner signs, statements in response to

Roberta's "Mothers have rights too," include "How would you know?" The last sign that Twyla makes says, "Is your mother well?" When Roberta sees this, she goes home and doesn't return. Twyla stops going too. Her signs don't have anything to do with the cause anymore. Due to the picketing classes are suspended until October. When the children return to school, there are a few fights at the beginning but everything quickly returns to normal, as if nothing had happened.

When Joseph graduates from high school Twyla can't help but look for Roberta, but she doesn't see her. Twyla is still bothered by what Roberta said about Maggie. She is bothered because they both know the truth; that they watched and didn't help her. Twyla did want to hurt Maggie. Maggie represented her dancing mother. She was nobody; like Twyla's mother, she could never tell anyone anything important. When the girls pushed Maggie down, Twyla knew she wouldn't scream; neither could Twyla. Twyla decides not to buy a tree at Christmas because she is trying to save money and her mother in law is having Christmas at her place. At the last minute, she changes her mind. She finds a tree, puts it in her car and drives slowly down the street. The streets are empty except for a group of formally dressed partygoers that are walking out of the Newburgh Hotel. Twyla decides to stop at a diner nearby to rest before she has to rush through all of her Christmas preparations.

In the diner, someone calls her name. It is Roberta. She is dressed in a silver gown and fur coat. There is a man and a woman with her. They all look a little drunk. Roberta asks Twyla how she is doing. Twyla says she is fine, just busy because of Christmas. Roberta tells the others to wait for her in the car and she sits down at Twyla's booth. She says she has to tell her something. Twyla tells her not to, she says it doesn't matter anymore. Roberta says it's about Maggie. She explains that she really did remember Maggie being black but now she is not sure. She says that because Maggie couldn't talk she thought she was crazy. She had been brought up in an institution, like the one Roberta's mother had been in, like the one Roberta always assumed she would be put in herself. She says that Twyla was right; they didn't hurt Maggie but Roberta wanted to. Twyla says they were only kids and that they were lonely and scared. Roberta says she knows and tells her that is all she wanted to say. Twyla says thank you. Twyla asks Roberta if she told her that her mom never stopped dancing. Roberta says yes and and hers never got well. Roberta cries. She looks at Twyla and asks her "what the hell happened to Maggie?"

Analysis

Recitatif is a short story by Toni Morrison. It deals with the affect that a stay in a state orphanage has on two girls as they grow into women. Although Twyla, the story's narrator, gives the initial impression that her time at the shelter was not that bad, it is clear that the experience haunts both of the girls for the rest of their lives. The story is set in present tense and uses a series of flashbacks to describe the history between Twyla and Roberta. The author uses a linear timeline to shape the relationship as the girls grow older. Twyla and Roberta run into each other during each major stage of life. Their first encounter occurs during childhood and the second happens as the girls are

coming of age in their late teenage years. Continuing this theme, the women meet as adults when they are both married and have children and their final encounter occurs after their children have graduated from high school and have left the house. The first person narration allows the readers a glimpse into Twyla's side of the story. The author's comparison of Twyla and Roberta's perspectives over years of new encounters illustrates how different people can interpret an event in different ways.

The girls' original meeting is awkward and tense. They don't like each other at first. This initial attitude foreshadows the women's rocky history. Aside from the explicit references to racial separation, the author also illustrates the nature of friendship. Friendships that span over several years are marked by ups and downs. There are several times throughout their lives that they don't get along, the worst of which being in adulthood, when a fight breaks out between Twyla and Roberta. Roberta accuses Twyla of hurting the kitchen helper, Maggie, from St. Bonny's. Twyla doesn't remember the story happening this way. She remembers Maggie falling. Later on Twyla remembers that the older girls in the orphanage pushed Maggie and she and Roberta didn't help the woman. Years after, Twyla admits to herself that she did want to hurt Maggie. This symbolizes the way that Twyla repressed some of her past to deal with her fears. In Roberta's case, she changes the past into fiction, believing that what she secretly wanted to happen was what actually happened. Neither of the women have an accurate, truthful memory of what happened, illustrating that their time in the shelter was traumatic for both of them.

Racial differences are a prevalent symbol throughout the story. The initial mention of this occurs when the girls first meet. Twyla doesn't want to room with Roberta because she is white. She has preconceptions about white people based on what her mother has taught her. In spite of this initial apprehension, the girls bond because no one else wants to be around them. As soon as the girls try to introduce their mothers, the problem presents itself again. Roberta's mother will not shakes hands with Twyla's mother. This symbolizes how racist attitudes are present in Roberta's family as well and foreshadows the girls' later encounter at Howard Johnson's. Twyla sees Roberta at the Howard Johnson's where she works. As the girls speak, Roberta is dismissive and rude. When they meet twelve years later, Twyla asks Roberta about this. Ironically, Roberta blames the fact that she snubbed Twyla on the racist attitudes of the time period, even though during this encounter Roberta was on her way to see Hendrix. Twyla knows that there is something wrong with Roberta's explanation because in her own experience she saw that the sixties were a time of heightened tolerance. Interestingly, their next encounter occurs during a time of "racial strife." The school board has separated students into segregated schools. Twyla and Roberta end up on opposite ends of the protest; however, in Twyla's case she uses the protest as a personal attack against Roberta.

Class differences also separate the two girls. When the women meet as adults, Twyla lives in Newburgh, a once middle class neighborhood, whose current residents are largely poor. Twyla states that fifty percent of Newburgh is on welfare. Roberta lives in a wealthy neighborhood nearby. She married a wealthy widow who works in computers. The women's final encounter takes place in a Newburgh diner. Twyla stops in for coffee

after buying a Christmas tree. Roberta has come from a formal party at the Newburgh hotel. She is dressed in an evening gown. This last scene represents how the women are still socially separated, despite the fact that they came from the same place, St. Bonaventure.

Disability is what they have in common. Twyla's dancing mother and Roberta's sick mother are both mentally unstable. Maggie, the disabled kitchen helper at St. Bonny's represents the girls mother's to each of them and this is the reason that neither of the girls try to help her when she is under attack by some teenagers at the orphanage. For Twyla, Maggie's walk symbolizes her mothers dancing. For Roberta the fact that Maggie grew up in an institution because she is deaf and dumb equates to the fact that her own mother is institutionalized. Roberta admits that she was afraid of ending up in an institution too. Both of the girls are afraid of becoming their mothers and for this reason they secretly want to hurt Maggie. To the girls, Maggie symbolizes their hardships. Maggie is under attack by the girls at the orphanage and so are the eight-year-old girls. None of the other kids likes Roberta and Twyla because they are not "real orphans.

In the end of the story Roberta finally apologizes to Twyla the accusations she made about Maggie. She tells Twyla that she did remember the event happening as she had formerly said but now, she isn't sure about the details. She admits to Twyla that she secretly wanted to hurt Maggie as well. Twyla doesn't tell her that she had the same feeling but she accepts Roberta's apology. Symbolically both of the women wished that they were in a less passive position will they were at the shelter. It is clear that after all the years that have passed both Twyla and Roberta are still haunted by the four months that they stayed at St. Bonny's together. Twyla tells Roberta that they were only children, offering her a chance to let go of this memory. However, in the last line of the story Roberta asks what really happened to Maggie, suggesting that this history will always be a part of Roberta. It is not something she can let go of.

Characters

James Benson

James Benson is Twyla's husband. He is a native of Newburgh, the town where the later part of the story takes place. He is "comfortable as a house slipper" and is associated with the kind of family and continuity that Twyla's history lacks.

Joseph Benson

Joseph Benson is Twyla and James's son. Twyla becomes an activist in the busing controversy when Joseph is bused out of district in order to ensure racial integration in the schools.

Twyla Benson

Twyla is the main character and the story's narrator. She was raised, in part, at an orphanage—not because her parents were dead, but because her mother chose or needed to "dance all night" and was thus unable to care for her. The fact that Twyla lacks mothering is central to her character. She marries into a stable, rooted family and becomes a mother herself. It is in this capacity that she becomes involved in the controversy over racial integration in the schools and gets into a conflict with Roberta, a friend from the orphanage with whom she has recently become reacquainted.

Twyla is characterized throughout the story in terms of her relationship to Roberta, which is often one of contrast. As in their divide over the busing crisis, these contrasts are based around the central issue of their racial difference. Despite the fact that Twyla and Roberta are of different races and also, as the story progresses, different economic classes, there are underlying similarities and shared experiences—particularly their relationships to their respective mothers—that suggest the possibility of understanding and friendship. However, the events of the story illustrate that this possibility is precarious due to the social and cultural pressures that discourage interracial friendship.

Big Bozo

Big Bozo is the nickname for Mrs. Itkin, who oversees the care of Twyla and Roberta while they stay at St. Bonny's shelter. Although she is their caretaker, she is not warm or maternal. The girls are allied in their dislike for Big Bozo.

Roberta Fisk

Roberta is Twyla's friend and she is also the source of the main conflict of the story. The two girls meet while they are staying at an orphanage, though both of their mothers are living. Roberta's mother is a stern, religious woman who is too sick to care for her. The fact that both girls have mothers who are unable to care for them is central to their connection and sympathy. Despite this bond, their racial difference causes the friendship to founder. Roberta snubs Twyla the first time they see each other years after leaving the orphanage. She is warm to her the next time they meet, after another twelve years have passed and Roberta has married a wealthy executive. But now that both Roberta and Twyla are themselves mothers, their racially determined opposition is exhibited through their different positions in the busing controversy that takes over their town. Their conflict is further symbolized through their differing memories of Maggie, a racially ambiguous mute woman who worked at the orphanage.

Mrs. Itkin

See Big Bozo

Maggie

Maggie works at the kitchen of St. Bonny's, the orphanage where Twyla and Roberta meet. She is mute and bowlegged and was herself raised in an institution. One of Twyla's strongest memories of St. Bonny's is an incident where Maggie fell down in the school's orchard. Twyla remembers the intimidating older girls from the orphanage laughing at Maggie and that she and Roberta did nothing to help her. But during their argument over the busing controversy Roberta tells Twyla that they had both kicked Maggie that day, and further confuses her by referring to Maggie as a black lady. Twyla had never considered Maggie black. Roberta later admits that they had not kicked her, only that she had wanted to. But both women remain confused as to what race "sandy-colored" Maggie should be considered. Twyla and Roberta identify with Maggie's weakness and also identify her with their mothers, and both regard her with a combination of sympathy and anger.

Mary

Mary is Twyla's mother. Twyla has to stay at St. Bonny's because Mary cannot take care of her. According to Twyla, this is due to the fact that Mary "danced all night." Mary is pretty and affectionate but she is an irresponsible and neglectful mother. She is contrasted to Roberta's mother, who is large, stern, and judgmental.

Roberta Norton

See Roberta Fisk

Roberta's mother

Roberta has to stay at St. Bonny's because her mother is too sick to take care of her. Roberta's mother wears a huge cross and carries a huge Bible. She brings Roberta plenty of good food but is not warm and refuses to shake hands with Mary.

Themes

Race and Racism

The issue of race and racism is central to the story. Twyla's first response to rooming with Ro-berta at St. Bonny's is to feel sick to her stomach. "It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning—it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race." Throughout the story Twyla and Ro-berta's friendship is inhibited by this sense of an uncrossable racial divide, played out against the background of national racial tensions such as the busing crisis. Racial conflicts provide the main turning points in the story's plot. At no point, however, does Morrison disclose which girl is black and which is white. She offers socially and historically specific descriptions in order to flesh out her characterizations of Twyla and Roberta, and some of these descriptions may lead readers to come to conclusions about the characters' races based on associations, but none is definitive. For example, when Roberta shows up at the Howard Johnson's where Twyla works, on her way to see Jimi Hen-drix, she's described as having "hair so big and wild I could hardly see her face." This may *suggest* that Roberta is black and wore an afro, a style for black hair popular in the 1960s. During this same period, however, hair and clothing styles (and music such as that of black rocker Hendrix) crossed over between black and white youths, and many whites wore their hair big and wild. Likewise, Roberta's socioeconomic progress from an illiterate foster care child to a rich executive's wife may *suggest* that she is white because of the greater economic power of whites in general. In Twyla's words, "Everything is so easy for them." Although economic class can be associated with race, there are plenty of white firemen and black executives. Race divides Twyla and Roberta again and again, and Morrison's unconventional approach to character description suggests that it is the way that blacks and whites are defined (and define themselves) against each other that leads to this divide.

Difference

While Morrison uses the device of withholding information about the characters' races in order to make a specific point about black-white relations in the mid-twentieth century, it also works to make a more general point about how differences among people are understood. Though there are people of many races living in the United States and even many people of mixed racial background, race is often understood in terms of a black-white difference. Because readers don't know which character is black and which is white, they are challenged to consider the way that these labels are created out of various opposing sets of associations or social codes. At one point Twyla comments on her protest sign slogan, admitting that "actually my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's." This may be understood as a metaphor for the idea of difference that Morrison expresses in the story. The signs or codes used to suggest Twyla's race don't make sense without an opposing set of signs or codes that define Roberta in contrast.

Friendship

Twyla and Roberta's relationship gives shape to the plot of the story, which traces their interactions over more than twenty years. The story explores the possibilities and the failures of their friendship. The first sentence of "Recitatif," "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick," establishes that Twyla and Roberta's situations are parallel on the one hand, yet opposite on the other. It is this quality that makes friendship between the girls such a complicated prospect. While Twyla's mother is healthy and attractive, but immoral, Roberta's is sick and unattractive, but upstanding. Twyla's mother has cautioned her against people of Roberta's race, saying they smell funny, and Roberta's mother refuses to shake Twyla's mother's hand. Nevertheless, the girls share the scarring experience of having been left in an orphanage by their living mothers, and their feelings of abandonment allow them an implicit sympathy and sense of alliance. Throughout the story the women's situations mirror each other, with certain correspondences bringing them together and suggesting the potential for a deep and genuine friendship, but with just as many differences causing conflict, distrust, and resentment. The end of the story suggests some degree of reconciliation, but the possibility of enduring friendship is still tenuous.

Style

Point of View

Twyla is the main character and also the narrator of the story. She describes the events in the first person, from her own perspective, and the events are presented as Twyla remembers them. One of the places where point of view is most pivotal is in terms of memories of Maggie. Early in the story, Twyla describes her memories of the orchard. At first she claims that "nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important, I mean," then goes on to describe how one day the orphanage's mute kitchen women, Maggie, fell down in the orchard and the big girls laughed at her. But as the story progresses it becomes clearer and clearer that this event was very significant to both Twyla and Roberta and to their relationship with one another. Twyla's memories of the incident are challenged when Roberta reports first that the big girls had pushed Maggie down, and then later not only that the two of them had joined in and kicked her, but that Maggie was black. Since Roberta had shared with Twyla this important and formative time at the orphanage, her differing recollections shake Twyla's confidence in her own ability to remember accurately, but also feed her existing distrust of Roberta.

Characterization

Morrison has an unusual approach to describing her characters. Though from the outset it is clear that Roberta and Twyla are of different races, Morrison does not disclose which girl is black and which is white. She does, however, offer rich and subtle descriptions of their ideas about racially sensitive issues, their social and economic status, their behavior, and their appearances. In this way, Morrison challenges readers to analyze their own assumptions about how these qualities may or may not be related to blackness and whiteness.

Plot

The story takes place over a period of more than 20 years, from the late 1950s when both girls are staying at St. Bonny's, through the early 1980s when their children have graduated from high school. The particular events of the story are played out against the historical setting of the mid-twentieth century. In particular, they span the most crucial years of the Civil Rights Movement, at times corresponding directly with specific events important to the Movement. For example, when Twyla and Roberta meet in the Howard Johnson's, Twyla mentions that students are riding buses South as activists for integration. Later, the women come into conflict over the controversial school integration tactic of busing. At times the history of race relations is reflected more indirectly, as in the assumptions about segregation at St. Bonny's.

The story is structured by Twyla and Roberta's sporadic interactions over this long period. Each of their meetings is described in detail, while important events in the

narrator's life such as her marriage are barely mentioned. The plot is further shaped by the two women's conversations about and disagreements over the event in the orchard with Maggie. This seemingly trivial event is reevaluated almost every time Twyla and Roberta speak, and its significance resonates symbolically through the other plot conflicts up to the story's conclusion.

Symbolism

The style of the story is realistic and its symbolism is understated. Food, for example, recurs throughout the plot and is symbolic of the motif of mothering, nurturing, and abandonment. At St. Bonny's Roberta gives Twyla her extra food, symbolizing the symbiotic alliance between the girls. Later, when her mother visits, Twyla spills her candy on the floor, and later this is what they eat for lunch. Twyla's mother does not understand what her daughter needs, so Twyla is literally as well as symbolically undernourished. Twyla reports that "the wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that's why I got into waitress work later—to match up the right people with the right food." Not only is food symbolic of mothering and the lack thereof, it is also more generally symbolic of the unfair or unequal ways that sustaining resources are distributed. In this light, it is significant that the despised and pitied figure of Maggie is employed at the orphanage as a kitchen woman. Both Twyla and Roberta associate her with their mothers' shortcomings in offering them care, and also with their own capacity for unfairness and disloyalty.

Historical Context

Race Relations in the 1950s: Segregation

In the 1950s communities throughout the country, particularly in the South, had segregated public facilities, including schools, public transportation, and restaurants. Throughout the country, social and cultural segregation was the norm. There were several landmark events in the struggle for racial equality during this decade and it is considered to mark the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1954, overturning a 1896 decision, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional, though integration would occur gradually. The decision was met with strong resistance from politicians and the public alike. The state government of Arkansas defied the Supreme Court and attempted to prevent black children from entering and integrating the Little Rock public schools. Blacks became organized around other forms of segregation as well. In 1956 Rosa Parks, a middle-aged seamstress, refused to give up her seat on a Birmingham, Alabama, bus for a white commuter, igniting a year-long bus boycott. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged as the leader of the movement.

Race Relations in the 1960s: Civil Rights Activism

Blacks began to stage "sit-ins" at white lunch counters and restaurants across the South in protest of segregation. Northern students, radicalized by their opposition to the Vietnam War, joined the Civil Rights Movement in greater numbers, participating in marches and voter registration drives. More middle-class whites became enamoured of black culture and more blacks became aware of their African roots. Organized demonstrations were planned, with both black and white student activists participating in "freedom rides" to the South in protest of segregated interstate public transportation policies. Martin Luther King rose to national prominence, promoting a philosophy of nonviolence. A number of activists, both black and white, were killed as a result of their positions, and King himself was assassinated in 1968. King's death led to intense disillusionment among many, followed by greater divisiveness among activists, the rise of Black Power separatism, and renunciation in some quarters of the nonviolent approach.

Race Relations in the 1970s: Busing

While much of the racial conflict of the 1960s took place in the South, Northern cities became more of a flashpoint in the Civil Rights strife of the 1970s. Economic strain and police brutality contributed to race riots in a number of cities, which alienated some white activists. One of the most significant triggers to racial tension in the North was the institution of busing to ensure the desegregation of schools. 1971 marked the beginning of court-ordered school busing. Courts declared that "de facto" segregation existed in many northern urban school districts and found it to be illegal. This meant that the

courts found Northern schools to be effectively segregated due to the existing racial mix in many school districts and neighborhoods, and that children must be bused out of their neighborhoods in order to ensure a fair access to educational resources. Busing ignited protests and outbreaks of violence in many communities. In the same time period, many blacks began to benefit from more equitable laws, entering politics and other positions of power in unprecedented numbers.

Critical Overview

"Recitatif" was published in a 1983 anthology of writings by African-American women entitled *Confirmation.* The purpose of the anthology—edited by Amiri Baraka, one of the most prominent voices of the radical Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, and his wife Amina—was to confirm the existence of several generations of black female writers whose work was often ignored or undervalued. Baraka writes in his introduction that the intention of the anthology is "in distinct contrast to the norm in American letters where 'American literature' is for the most part white and male and bourgeois." This is in keeping with Morrison's view of her mission as a writer. Saying that she is foremost a reader, she claims that she writes the kind of books that she wants to read but hasn't been able to find.

The *Confirmation* anthology marked the beginning of a period when an unprecedented number of black women writers—Alice Walker, Jamaica Kincaid, Gloria Naylor, and Morrison among them—rose to prominence and "crossed over" for commercial success among a mostly white reading public. While Morrison had already published several notable novels by 1983, including *Song of Solomon,* which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and is considered to have signaled her status as an author of the first ranks, she had not yet reached her present level of distinction. She is now considered not only the foremost African-American woman writer but among the foremost living writers of any nation, race, or gender.

Morrison's greatest fame came with the publication of 1987's *Beloved.* When this emotionally-gripping and tragic story of an ex-slave and the daughter she murdered failed to win any major American prizes, a group of prominent black writers and intellectuals published a letter of protest in the *New York Times Book Review* decrying the lack of national attention to her work. *Beloved* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction the following year and contributed to Morrison's selection in 1993 as the recipient for the Nobel Prize in Literature, the world's highest literary honor. In addition to profuse critical and scholarly praise, many of Morrison's novels have been bestsellers. In 1992 Morrison published a novel and a work of criticism which were on the fiction and non-fiction bestseller lists simultaneously.

Morrison's precipitous rise and her mastery of the novel form have perhaps overshadowed her other achievements. Though she has written a play and a book of criticism, Morrison is known first and foremost as a novelist. 'Recitatif' is Toni Morrison's only published work of short fiction and the story has received little critical attention, especially when compared to the huge amount of scholarship concerning Morrison's major novels. It differs significantly from her novels aesthetically, for it lacks the dimension of magic that has led critics to compare her writing to the Latin American school of magical realism. It shares, however, with her principal works a concern with history, memory, and the power of naming within the racial culture of the United States.

In an interview with Elissa Schappell for the *Paris Review* Morrison explains that her objective as a black writer in a white-dominated culture is to attempt to "alter language,

simply free it up, not to repress it or confine it, but to open it up. Tease it. Blast its racist straightjacket." This is her intention in not naming the races of the two women in "Recitatif." Morrison admits that she intended to confuse the reader, but also to "provoke and enlighten.... What was exciting was to be forced as a writer not to be lazy and rely on obvious codes." Commenting on this strategy, critic Jan Furman writes in *Toni Morrison's Fiction* that, like Twyla and Roberta, readers experience a disillusionment or dystopia, "if one may view Morrison's deliberate and clever misappropriation of racial stereotype as a dystopic condition for readers accustomed to stereotypes. In 'Recitatif' racial identities are shifting and elusive.... Questions beget questions in Morrison's text, and all require strenuous consideration. Despite most readers' wishes to assess, settle, draw conclusions, Morrison is resolute in requiring readers to participate in creating meaning." Such participation is characteristic of Morrison's goal as a writer to transform readers through transforming their relationship to language. In his introduction to *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* Henry Louis Gates, Jr., aptly describes the power of Morrison's writing as lying in the fact that it is "at once difficult and popular. A subtle craftsperson and a compelling weaver of tales, she 'tells a good story,' but the stories she tells are not calculated to please."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor. In the following essay, she discusses the figure of Maggie, the mute kitchen woman, as the story's most important metaphor.

"What the hell happened to Maggie?" Rather than offering a traditional resolution, Toni Morrison's short story "Recitatif" concludes with this question. Maggie—the mute, bowlegged kitchen woman at the orphanage where the story's two main characters, Twyla and Roberta, were raised—haunts their adult lives and their relationship to one another. Neither of the girls ever knew Maggie well or even had much contact with her. And neither of them ever saw her again after leaving St. Bonny's. But the issue of what happened to Maggie—literally and figuratively—recurs at many of the plot's main turning points. At several junctures Twyla, the narrator, reevaluates an incident in which Maggie was humiliated by the older girls at St. Bonny's orchard. And at several others, Roberta and Twyla discuss—and disagree about—their own participation in this shameful incident. Why does it matter so much what happened to Maggie? Though she is central to its meaning, Maggie is not an active character in the story. That is, she doesn't *do* anything. Instead, she stands for things. Twyla and Roberta keep thinking and talking about her because she represents their conflict and their closeness, their similarity and their differences. From beginning to end, Maggie remains a figure of ambiguity. As the final line of the story suggests, Morrison has no intention of resolving the questions Maggie raises; instead she leaves her readers with this challenge. But she does so only after supplying a wealth of clues that help us understand why Twyla and Roberta return again and again to the subject of what happened to Maggie. In this essay I will explore Maggie as a metaphor—a figure that represents not only the conflicts within and between the two main characters, but the broader social dynamics that these conflicts reflect.

One thorny issue that Maggie raises is how confusing the distinction between victims and victimizers can become. When Twyla first mentions the orchard, she says, "I don't know why I dreamt about that orchard so much. Nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important, I mean." The orchard is the site of Twyla and Roberta's intimidation by St. Bonny's older girls and also of Maggie's humiliation. In the orchard Twyla and Roberta watch the older girls as they "played radios and danced with each other. They'd light out after us and pull our hair or twist our arms." These big girls seemed scary to them at the time, but looking back Twyla realizes that they were only "put-out girls, scared runaways most of them. Poor little girls who fought their uncles off but looked tough to us, and mean. God did they look mean." The orchard is important because it is the setting where Twyla and Roberta first become conscious of their position in a hierarchy of power. In a way, every person in the orchard is a victim—powerless and suffering. But within the small world of St. Bonny's, the older girls seem powerful, despite the fact that they are poor runaways. They group together and use this power over Twyla and Roberta, and, later, over Maggie. As Twyla narrates it, one day Maggie falls down as she rushes through the orchard to catch her bus, and the older girls laugh at her. Twyla and Roberta, like Maggie, suffer from the older girls' intimidation, but

instead of coming to Maggie's defense, they recognize that Maggie is mute and cannot "shout back" as they do. "We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared of those girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil." Compared to Maggie, they are relatively powerful, and they call her names. They fear being voiceless and weak, so they identify with Maggie's victimizers.

They are able to do this not only because they have voices, but also because they have each other. Twyla and Roberta are allied at St. Bonny's across the divide of their racial difference because both of them have living mothers who left them there. They are lucky that their parents aren't dead, but suffer the unique pain of being abandoned. While at St. Bonny's they form a united front, for the similarity in this most important fact of their childhood lives bonds them strongly. "Two little girls who knew what nobody else knew—how not to ask questions. How to believe what had to be believed." However, when they meet again, their differences are more apparent. Roberta attributes their hostile meeting in Howard Johnson's to a historic racial divide: "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white." In Newburgh, not only do they live in different sections of a racially segregated community, but they are of different economic classes. Roberta has married a wealthy executive and Twyla has married a fireman.

When the town is divided by the busing controversy, so too are Twyla and Roberta. Roberta opposes busing on the grounds of "mother's rights." Twyla supports busing on the grounds of "children's rights." Both are protesting that their rights are being infringed upon and both sides feel like they are victims. The two women's private, individual conflicts over what happened to Maggie are reflected in this most overt, public conflict of story. Twyla stops Roberta while she is picketing to argue with her, and soon a crowd surrounds her car and begins rocking it in order to intimidate her.

Automatically I reached for Roberta, like in the old days in the orchard when they saw us watching them and we had to get out of there, and if one of us fell the other pulled her up 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.

While at St. Bonny's the girls had been loyal to each other through their shared experience of abandonment; here Roberta abandons Twyla. Morrison describes the scene in terms that echo Maggie's humiliation in the orchard. Since "no receiving hand was there" to help Twyla, she feels as if she is in Maggie's position—fallen, helpless, and alone. Roberta is thinking about Maggie at the very same time. Despite the parallel, clear from Twyla's point of view, between herself and Maggie, Roberta proceeds to tell her that she is instead like the big girls who humiliated Maggie. "You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot."

Here the ambiguity of Maggie as a figure who is both despised and identified with in her powerlessness is compounded by the ambiguity of her racial status. The power hierarchies that Maggie's humiliation in the orchard reflect are now related to the power hierarchies of race as established through the story's historical setting. Previously

recalled by Twyla as "sandy-colored," Roberta now describes Maggie as black. Twyla first responds by disagreeing about Maggie's race, but later she admits, "Actually I couldn't be certain. She wasn't pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that. What I remember was the kiddie hat, and the semicircle legs." The fact that Twyla really doesn't know what race Maggie belonged to is a testimony to the fact that race made little difference in the power hierarchy of the orchard. But now, in the atmosphere of racial strife that divides Twyla and Roberta, the conflict over what happened to Maggie takes on racial meaning. In a racially polarized world, medium-colored Maggie can serve in the imagination as a symbol of black victimhood or she cannot. As is the case with Morrison's characterization of Twyla and Roberta's racial difference, race lies not in the skin of the subject but in the eye of the observer.

Perhaps because Maggie does so little, she means so much. At the story's conclusion, Roberta, dressed in silver and fur, meets Twyla coincidentally at a diner after an elegant party. She confesses to lying about their participation in the assault on Maggie in their childhood and tearfully asks what happened to her as a way of confronting her denied past as a "state kid" who spent time in an orphanage. This also serves as a gesture of reconciliation with Twyla, who, despite a diametrically opposite present lifestyle, shares her past of abandonment and loss. Twyla has already resolved that she never had kicked Maggie, but concedes that she had wanted to. She identifies Maggie with her mother, Mary. "Maggie was my dancing mother," Twyla says, in a statement that explains both her repressed hostility toward Maggie and her pity for her carefree, irresponsible mother. "Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use." At the diner Roberta also admits to wishing that she had kicked Maggie. And, despite the fact that Roberta's stern, proper mother seems the exact opposite of Mary, Roberta identifies Maggie with her, as well. "She was brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too." Furthermore, both Twyla and Roberta identify with Maggie themselves. "I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't—just like me—and I was glad about that," Twyla states. Through the ambiguous figure of Maggie both women find a way to unlock their ambivalent feelings toward their own mothers. And through remembering their identifications with this woman whom they had once joined together against, they find a way to articulate a connection that transcends the racial chasm that divides them. But the question remains, "What the hell happened to Maggie?" The two women will never know, nor will they ever be as whole as if they had not abandoned Maggie and, eventually, each other.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, "What Happened to Mag-gie," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Goldstein-Shirley explores the ambiguity of the two protagonists' races in "Recitatif," saying it necessitates a closer and more careful reading of the story for the reader.

Like all of her fiction, the only short story ever published by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison challenges its readers. From its outset, "Recitatif" keeps its readers off-balance. Its plot enigmas, language tricks, and story line gaps disturb readers, prodding them out of lazy reading and complacency and into fuller, deeper engagement with the text. These unusual textual elements push readers to solve the mysteries, fill in the gaps, and thereby complete the story. By participating in making meaning out of the text, readers experience the story on a more visceral level than they otherwise would. Furthermore, they respond on a meta-analytical level, encouraged to consider why the text's elements influenced their responses in particular ways. By using such rhetorical devices to pull readers into meaning-making and self-reflection, Morrison also pulls readers into questioning their own assumptions, particularly about race.

The readers' uneasiness begins with the story's first paragraph, when a narrator, speaking in first person, begins to tell how she and a girl named Roberta were taken to a shelter called St. Bonny's. Readers cannot determine the narrator's identity, but from the narrator's casual language (e.g., referring to a restroom as a "john") and mistakes in grammar (e.g., ". . . when Roberta and me came . . ."; using sentence fragments and improper punctuation), readers begin to make assumptions about her class status. Most significantly, the text's first page introduces readers to the principal mystery of the text: the racial identities of the two girls. The second paragraph, which indirectly provides the narrator's identity, Twyla, indicates that Roberta is "from a whole other race." Members of Roberta's race, which is not specified here or anywhere else in the text, "never washed their hair and they smelled funny," according to Twyla's mother. In this instance, readers can be certain that by "they" Twyla is referring to members of Roberta's race. Later, when she disparagingly speaks about the residents of the wealthy part of town, she remarks, "Everything is so easy for them." In a stroke, readers' confidence that "they" and "them" means the other race is shattered; perhaps Twyla means the other class. At this early point in the story, however, readers are only beginning to work on the puzzle of the characters' racial identities, perhaps not yet realizing that the text will never yield that information.

Later in the story, when the girls' mothers come to visit (Twyla explains that she and Roberta "weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky. We were dumped" by incompetent mothers), Roberta's mother brings chicken legs, ham sandwiches, oranges, chocolate-covered graham crackers, and milk. Whatever conclusions readers reached based on the girls' opinions of St. Bonaventure's food now must be reconsidered. If the chicken legs are fried, perhaps this lunch indicates that Roberta is African American, readers relying on stereotypical notions might assume. On the other hand, many African Americans cannot tolerate the lactose found in milk—a fact more likely known by black readers—so the description of Roberta drinking milk from a

Thermos conjures in the minds of some readers images of a white girl. Finally, if readers' assumptions about who eats what kind of food are not already shaky, Twyla then remarks, "The wrong food is always with the wrong people," further destabilizing readers' conclusions.

The characters' names themselves also resist readers' pat conclusions. Roberta, a feminine form of Robert, is a centuries-old European name, leading some readers to associate it with the white race. On the other hand, some readers might be familiar with African Americans named Roberta, such as singer Roberta Flack. Furthermore, about halfway into the story, readers learn that Roberta's surname is Fisk, which might remind some readers of Fisk University, a historically black college in Nashville. Twyla, a more uncommon name, might lead some readers to believe she is black if they associate African Americans with non-traditional given names. Twyla Tharp, the dancer and choreographer, however, is white. (Although readers learn Roberta's surname, Twyla reveals only her post-marriage surname, depriving readers of a potential clue.) Readers then learn that Roberta has married a man named Kenneth Norton, also the name of a black heavyweight boxer. Depending upon readers' knowledge and assumptions, they disregard some of these clues and incorporate others in their conjectures about the characters' racial identities. Readers familiar with more than one of these name-related clues face the more difficult task of assigning relative weight to them, probably never feeling certain of their conclusions.

Readers' assumptions of phenotypical, corporeal markers also influence their conclusions about the characters' races, and, to the extent that their assumptions about those markers conflict with other textual clues, readers continuously second-guess themselves each time they encounter a new clue. The first body-related clue comes early in the story, when the girls curl each other's hair before their mothers arrive. Readers might wonder why, if one of them is black (as is clear from Twyla's earlier comment that "we looked like salt and pepper," she needs her hair curled. The uncertainty is only beginning at this point. Meeting again in the coffee shop some years later, Roberta sports "big and wild" hair, perhaps suggesting an afro. The next description of Roberta's hair comes when Twyla sees her in the grocery store. Twyla reports that "her huge hair was sleek now, smooth around a small, nicely shaped head." Did Roberta straighten her (naturally curly) hair or stop curling her (naturally straight) hair? Morrison notably avoids the adjective kinky, which readers more likely would associate with African-American hair texture. In a later encounter at a demonstration against busing for school desegregation, startled by their mutual animosity, Roberta says to Twyla, "I used to curl your hair," to which Twyla responds, "I hated your hands in my hair." Was Twyla's hair straight, then? And if so, does that mean she is white? Readers struggle to form mental pictures of the characters out of these troubling clues.

Twyla's descriptions of the girls' mothers provide more but equally ambiguous clues for readers. Twyla is horrified when her mother arrives for a visit wearing "those green slacks I hated and hated even more now because didn't she know we were going to chapel? And that fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them." Ratty and garish clothes: Do those suggest to white readers that she is "black"? Do black readers think such descriptions indicate "white trash"? Are

there cross-over assumptions, such as black readers associating shabby clothes with blacks and white readers imagining Twyla's mother as white trash? And if readers do make one of these associations, they must ask themselves why. Is it because they associate ratty clothing with one race or the other? Do they associate ragged clothing with poverty, and then jump to the association of poverty with one race or the other? Then Twyla remarks that the green slacks "made her behind stick out." Do the slacks make it appear that her buttocks stick out although they really do not, or do they emphasize buttocks that really do stick out? And if the latter, do protruding buttocks suggest an African-American physique?

Added to this unflattering description of Twyla's mother is her depiction of Roberta's mother, which, if readers are prone to associate body shape with one race or another according to prevailing stereotypes, complicates their conclusions. If readers think that protruding buttocks indicate Twyla's mother's blackness, they somehow must reconcile this description of Roberta's mother: "She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen." Readers inclined to rely on physical markers on which to base racial identification are unsettled by these descriptions. Moreover, they must question why they view the descriptions as contradictory. The cross, too, provides a clue that is difficult to interpret: Does this assertion of her piety indicate a more flamboyant faith, such as Southern Baptist, typically associated with African American Christians?

Complicating matters further, Twyla describes the mothers' behaviors in ways that challenge readers seeking to use behaviors rather than physiques as a basis for their conjectures. First, Roberta's mother refuses to shake the hand of Twyla's mother. Is it because she is a white bigot, a resentful black woman, or a black bigot? Or is her rebuff unrelated to race? Perhaps it is based on perceived class difference. Or maybe Roberta's mother is simply anti-social. The subsequent response of Twyla's mother exacerbates readers' confusion. At the entrance to the chapel, where the rebuff occurred, she loudly says, "That bitch!", an interjection so crass and inappropriate that Twyla thinks her mother "really needed to be killed." Is such behavior associated with one race? Or is it class? Or simply upbringing?

The confusion between class and race also arises when readers encounter the scene in which Twyla and Roberta face off on opposite sides of the issue of mandatory busing for school desegregation. Roberta stands opposed to busing; Twyla then counter-protests in favor of it. Does Roberta oppose busing because she opposes desegregation? If so, is her opinion related to her race? If so, is her race white or black? Many blacks have opposed busing, desegregation, or both; readers with a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the civil rights era know they cannot assume that her opposition to busing means she is a white racist. Readers also must consider whether Roberta, who by this time has acquired the trappings—and presumably the attitudes—of affluence, opposes busing on the grounds that her children will be sent to inferior schools. Her convictions about busing might be entirely unrelated to race. When it becomes clear that Twyla's stance stems more from her resentment of Roberta than from her own political opinions, readers cannot derive more insight from the situation.

Other ambiguous clues relate to Twyla's apparent naivete and ignorance. In the coffee shop scene, Roberta tells Twyla that she and her companions are headed for California, where one of them has an appointment with Hendrix. Never having heard of rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix, Twyla asks, "What's she doing now?" to which Roberta responds, "Hen-drix. Jimi Hendrix, asshole. He's only the biggest—Oh, wow. Forget it." Assuming that readers know who Hendrix was—the text never does identify him—they must grapple with Twyla's ignorance. Some might conclude that her unfamiliarity with the black musician indicates she is white. As Lula Fragd, a black critic, pointed out to her white colleague, Elizabeth Abel, who had made that assumption [recounted in *Critical Inquiry*], most of Hendrix's fans were white, not black, a fact that black readers are more likely to know.

Twyla also expresses remarkable ignorance about race relations in the United States. When Roberta explains her earlier coldness to Twyla, she says, "Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black-white. You know how everything was." Twyla tells the reader:

But I didn't know. I thought it was just the opposite. Busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson's together. They roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protesters. You got to see everything at Howard Johnson's and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days.

Although the reader cannot pin down precisely when the coffee shop scene took place, it most likely occurred after Twyla was about 16 (old enough to work fulltime), which was in 1953, but before the characters reunite again, presumably around 1965. During this Jim Crow period, it is possible that a young, white person might be unaware of the tensions underlying apparently good relations between the races. Readers might consider this explanation of Twyla's remark, thinking perhaps that Twyla is white. Twyla's later comments, though, lead readers to think that her naive belief that race relations were good might stem from a general lack of awareness about social matters, not only about race relations. About busing, she says, "I thought it was a good thing until I heard it was a bad thing. I mean I didn't know." If she simply is unused to thinking about social issues, her unenlightened sense of race relations might not signify whiteness, after all. Again, readers' conclusions are stymied.

Silence and absence recur as themes in "Recitatif," and augment Morrison's rhetorical strategy of inducing the reader to complete the text. The story ends not with a statement but a question, asked by Roberta: "What the hell happened to Maggie?", referring to the kitchen worker who is tormented by the girls in the shelter when she falls in the orchard. The puzzles of what really happened to Maggie, whether she was black or not, and whether Roberta and Twyla participated in the orchard incident increasingly trouble readers as they progress. Early in Twyla's narrative, she says she often dreams of the orchard but does not know why. "Nothing really happened there," she says. This comment is most problematic. The entire narrative comprises Twyla's recollections of past events. If, as readers naturally assume when reading a first-person account, the narrator is speaking to them in the present, then why would Twyla say that nothing really happened in the orchard? Telling a retrospective story, she ought to know that the

incident with Maggie, which obsesses her throughout the story, is not only significant but crucial.

The enigma of Maggie is emphasized by Twyla's description: "The kitchen women with legs like parentheses." Parentheses indicate something of secondary importance, which, added to Maggie's muteness, connote a passive, marginalized victim, a cipher; the bow legs conjure the image of a zero itself. Reduced to nothing, Maggie is robbed of agency, which leaves for her only the role of pawn in the battle of memories waged by Twyla and Roberta over three decades. Twyla first tells readers that Maggie fell down in the orchard and the older girls at the shelter assaulted her. When she accidentally meets Roberta 20 years after they left St. Bonaventure, Roberta contradicts Twyla's recollection of the incident with Maggie, telling her that Maggie did not trip; the girls pushed Maggie down. Twyla refuses to believe this account, but Roberta's insistence plants doubt in her mind: "Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn't forget a thing like that." Readers take her at her word, until she adds, "Would I?" With the introduction of Twyla's uncertainty about her own memory, readers, dependent entirely on Twyla as a source of information, also begin to feel uncertain.

The uncertainty intensifies as the narrative progresses. At their next unpleasant reunion, at which each woman stands literally and figuratively on opposite sides of a busing and desegregation demonstration, Roberta says to Twyla, "You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground. You kicked a black lady and you have the nerve to call me a bigot." This new version of the story introduces the notion that Twyla and perhaps Roberta participated in tormenting Maggie, and that Maggie, whom at first Twyla described as "sandy-colored," was black. Twyla's unspoken response is, "What was she saying? Black? Maggie wasn't black." Later Twyla acknowledges that, although she is certain that she did not kick Maggie, Maggie might have been black: "When I thought about it I actually couldn't be certain." To readers, this incident is becoming a *Rashomon* of sorts, leaving them to wonder which version of the story to believe. Finally, Twyla seems fairly certain: "I didn't kick her; I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to," a version that Roberta finally corroborates during their last reunion at Christmas when she tearfully confesses that they had not kicked Maggie. But the uncertainty continues when Roberta says, "I really did think she was black. I didn't make that up. I really thought so. But now I can't be sure." If neither she nor Twyla feels certain about Maggie's race, neither can readers. Then, the story concludes with Roberta's unanswered question, "What the hell happened to Maggie?" Twyla's earlier statement that she and Roberta were two girls who knew how to believe what had to be believed becomes quite ironic, for readers have found that the characters, and therefore the readers, do not know what to believe.

Roberta's accusation that Twyla kicked a black woman and yet has the nerve to call her, Roberta, a bigot exacerbates readers' distrust of the characters' memories. Readers must try to recall whether Twyla did indeed call Roberta a bigot; perhaps readers will review the narrative for confirmation, having learned to question their own memory of the narrative. In fact, nowhere in the text does Twyla call Roberta a bigot. This further undermining of the readers' faith in the characters' memories—as well as their own—

also complicates the readers' task of identifying the characters' races, because readers are likely to bring to the text an assumption about who bigots tend to be, who is more likely to accuse another of bigotry, and who is more likely to make a false accusation of bigotry. The problematic accusation also calls into question the completeness of Twyla's storytelling; perhaps she did call Roberta a bigot but failed to report it to her readers.

Some aspects of the text itself disturb readers as much as do puzzles within the story. These mysterious elements of the text, which might be called meta-textual enigmas, raise questions about how readers are meant to deal with the story. For example, when recounting the episode of Roberta's unexpected appearance at the coffee shop in which Twyla worked, Twyla says:

I walked over to the booth, smiling and wondering if she would remember me. Or even if she wanted to remember me. Maybe she didn't want to be reminded of St. Bonny's or to have anybody know she was ever there. I know I never talked about it to anybody.

Yet, Twyla is in the act of telling somebody—the readers/listeners of the story—about her experiences at St. Bonaventure. If she refrains from discussing with anybody—her husband, her son—even the fact that she lived for four months at St. Bonaventure, readers wonder why she is speaking to them about the experiences. In fact, ostensibly, the sole basis for the encounter between her and the readers/listeners is Twyla's apparent desire to share intimate revelations about such events, some of which she acknowledges to be embarrassing, shameful, or painful to face. By presenting this paradox, the author seems to be toying with the conceit of a first-person-narrated story. While some puzzles within the story disturb readers less experienced with wringing meaning from a narrative, this meta-mystery surrounding the reading experience itself appears to be aimed at readers more thoroughly trained and skilled, for they would be most likely to notice the incongruity of an ostensibly reticent yet thoroughly confessional narrator. Thus, some of the disturbing tactics seem designed for one kind of reader, and others for another kind.

Besides listening to or reading the text, readers face another possible way to perceive it. Perhaps "Recitatif" is not a spoken or written tale, but a sung one, combining speech and music. Even the title reflects the vocal foundation of Morrison's story. The Oxford English Dictionary defines "recitative," which comes from the French *recitatif,* as a "style of musical declamation, intermediate between singing and ordinary speech, commonly employed in the dialogue and narrative parts of operas and oratorios." By using the French word, Morrison not only alludes to the French term *faire le recit de sa vie*—to tell the story of one's life—but also connotes the term's meaning in music. Morrison's connotation of an operatic recitative—a middle ground between verbal expression and musical expression—is particularly appropriate given the parallel significance of oral storytelling and musical signification in African and African-American culture. As Robert Palmer explains in *Deep Blues,* black slaves by the middle of the 18th century were forbidden from using drums and horns throughout North America except in French Louisiana. "Plantation owners had learned, sometimes the hard way, that such loud instruments could be used to signal slave insurrections," Palmer writes. All that was left with which to express themselves "utilized mankind's most basic musical resources, the

voice and the body." Vocal expression, either spoken or sung, not only survived slavery, but perhaps enabled the slaves themselves to survive slavery. With a one-word title, Morrison thus captures and honors 400 years of African-American expression. As Palmer states: "Through singing to themselves, hollering across the fields, and singing together while working and worshipping, they developed a hybridized musical language that distilled the very essence of innumerable African vocal traditions." By connoting this tradition, Morrison consciously places "Recitatif" in an African-American expressive tradition.

The text's relentless perturbation of its readers jars them from a position of relatively passive reception into one of active co-creation. This effect not only intensifies readers' attention to the story and their sense of stake in it, but also serves a broader, ideological purpose. "Recitatif" exemplifies what Catherine Belsey [in *Critical Practice*] calls an "interrogative text," as opposed to a declarative or imperative text. The interrogative text

disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the "author" inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory.

In "Recitatif," the author's attitude is shrouded behind that of Twyla, and even Twyla's perspective is one of confusion, as she confesses her lack of understanding of contemporary race relations. Belsey continues:

Thus, even if the interrogative text does not precisely . . . seek "to obtain some information" from the reader, it does literally invite the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises.

"Recitatif" certainly invites readers to answer questions about the narrative itself, and, more significantly, about extra-narrative matters. Why do readers interpret clues in particular ways? What assumptions do they make about race and racism? Indeed, why do readers feel it is important to ascertain the characters' respective races in the first place? At the very least, readers must realize their own predilection for racial categorization, a more benign component of racism which John H. Stanfield II calls "racialism." Beyond such a realization, some readers confront the prejudices that lead to how they categorize.

Belsey asserts, "The work of ideology is to present the position of the subject as fixed and unchangeable." By presenting a text and the "reality" it depicts as *unfixed* and *changeable,* Morrison not only calls attention to an ideology that seems so natural that individuals fail to recognize it as such, but challenges that ideology. The text stirs up matters of race and racism, refusing to perpetuate oversimplified and unquestioned assumptions about racial categories and stereotypes. Moreover, by guiding the reader into inferring the characters' races—in addition to demanding that the reader solve other sorts of textual and narrative puzzles—"Recitatif" forces the reader's complicity in the story's mission, which is to deconstruct racism. Morrison has stated that she wrote the story as an experiment in language, to see whether she could write a story without relying on the insidious linguistic shortcuts of racial categorization and stereotyping that

she feels are so prevalent in American literature. By making readers supply, from their imagination and experience, the missing information, the story encourages them to question the sources of those inferences. The reader is thus brought into the "Morrisonian" task of questioning racial categorization and stereotyping. In short, Morrison ingeniously works toward her ongoing mission of deconstructing race and racism by getting the reader to do so, a strategy that also pervades her novels and non-fiction.

Source: David Goldstein-Shirley, "Race and Response: Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif'," in *Short Story,* Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring, 1997, pp. 77-86.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Abel discusses how the question of race in "Recitatif" prompts readers to examine the story's social clues more closely.

Twyla opens the narrative of Toni Morrison's provocative story "Recitatif" (1982) by recalling her placement as an eight-year-old child in St. Bonaventure, a shelter for neglected children, and her reaction to Roberta Fisk, the roommate she is assigned: "The minute I walked in . . . I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken out of your own bed early in the morning—it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race. And Mary, that's my mother, she was right. Every now and then she would stop dancing long enough to tell me something important and one of the things she said was that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny. Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean." The racial ambiguity so deftly installed at the narrative's origin through codes that function symmetrically for black women and for white women ("they never washed their hair and they smelled funny") intensifies as the story tracks the encounters of its two female protagonists over approximately thirty years. Unmediated by the sexual triangulations (the predations of white men on black women, the susceptibility of black men to white women) that have dominated black women's narrative representations of women's fraught connections across racial lines, the relationship of Twyla and Roberta discloses the operations of race in the feminine. This is a story about a black woman and a white woman; but which is which?

I was introduced to "Recitatif" by a black feminist critic, Lula Fragd. Lula was certain that Twyla was black; I was equally convinced that she was white; most of the readers we summoned resolve the dispute divided similarly along racial lines. By replacing the conventional signifiers of racial difference (such as skin color) with radically relativistic ones (such as who smells funny to whom) and by substituting for the racialized body a series of disaggregated cultural parts—pink-scalloped socks, tight green slacks, large hoop earrings, expertise at playing jacks, a taste for Jimi Hendrix or for bottled water and asparagus—the story renders race a contested terrain variously mapped from diverse positions in the social landscape. By forcing us to construct racial categories from highly ambiguous social clues, "Recitatif" elicits and exposes the unarticulated racial codes that operate at the boundaries of consciousness. To understand the cultural specificity of these codes, Morrison writes into the text a figure of racial undecidability: Maggie, the mute kitchen worker at St. Bonaventure, who occasions the text's only mention of skin color, an explicitly ambiguous sandy color, and who walks through the text with her little kid's hat and her bowed legs "like parentheses," her silent self a blank parenthesis, a floating signifier. For both girls a hated reminder of their unresponsive mothers, Maggie is not "raced" to Twyla (that is, she is by default white); to Roberta, she is black. The two girls' readings of Maggie become in turn clues for our readings of them, readings that emanate similarly from our own cultural locations.

My own reading derived in part from Roberta's perception of Maggie as black; Roberta's more finely discriminating gaze ("she wasn't pitch-black, I knew," is all Twyla can summon to defend her assumption that Maggie is white) seemed to me to testify to the

firsthand knowledge of discrimination. Similarly, Roberta is sceptical about racial harmony. When she and Twyla retrospectively discuss their tense encounter at a Howard Johnson's where Twyla was a waitress in the early 1960s, they read the historical context differently: "'Oh, Twyla, you know how it was in those days: black—white. You know how everything was.' But I didn't know. I thought it was just the opposite. Busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson's together. They roamed together then: students; musicians, lovers, protesters. You got to see everything at Howard Johnson's and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days." In the civil rights movement that Twyla sees as a common struggle against racial barriers, Roberta sees the distrust of white intervention and the impulse toward a separatist Black Power movement: she has the insider's perspective on power and race relations.

It was a more pervasive asymmetry in authority, however, that secured my construction of race in the text, a construction I recount with considerable embarrassment for its possible usefulness in fleshing out the impulse within contemporary white feminism signalled by the "not just idiosyncratic" confession that stands as this paper's epigraph. As Gallop [in *Around 1981: Academic Feminist Literary Theory*] both wittily acknowledges the force of African-American women's political critique of white academic feminism's seduction by "French men" and, by simply transferring the transference, reen acts the process of idealization that unwittingly obscures more complex social relations, I singled out the power relations of the girls from the broader network of cultural signs. Roberta seemed to me consistently the more sophisticated reader of the social scene, the subject presumed by Twyla to know, the teller of the better (although not necessarily more truthful) stories, the adventurer whose casual mention of an appointment with Jimi Hendrix exposes the depths of Twyla's social ignorance ("'Hendrix? Fantastic,' I said. 'Really fantastic. What's she doing now'?" From the girls' first meeting at St. Bonaventure, Twyla feels vulnerable to Roberta's judgment and perceives Roberta (despite her anxiety about their differences) as possessing something she lacks and craves: a more acceptably negligent mother (a sick one rather than a dancing one) and, partially as a consequence, a more compelling physical presence that fortifies her cultural authority. Twyla is chronically hungry; Roberta seems to her replete, a daughter who has been adequately fed and thus can disdain the institutional Spam and Jell-O that Twyla devours as a contrast to the popcorn and Yoo-Hoo that had been her customary fare. The difference in maternal stature, linked in the text with nurture, structures Twyla's account of visiting day at St. Bonaventure. Twyla's mother, smiling and waving "like she was the little girl," arrives wearing tight green buttocks-hugging slacks and a ratty fur jacket for the chapel service, and bringing no food for the lunch that Twyla consequently improvises out of fur-covered jelly beans from her Easter basket. "Bigger than any man," Roberta's mother arrives bearing a huge cross on her chest, a Bible in the crook of her arm, and a basket of chicken, ham, oranges, and chocolate-covered graham crackers. In the subsequent Howard Johnson scene that Twyla's retrospective analysis links with the frustrations of visiting day ("The wrong food is always with the wrong people. Maybe that's why I got into waitress work later—to match up the right people with the right food" the difference in stature is replayed between the two daughters. Roberta, sitting in a booth with "two guys smothered in head and facial hair," her own hair "so big and wild I could hardly see her face," wearing a "powder-blue halter and shorts outfit and earrings the size of

bracelets," rebuffs Twyla, clad in her waitress outfit, her knees rather than her midriff showing, her hair in a net, her legs in thick stockings and sturdy white shoes. Although the two bodies are never directly represented, the power of metonymy generates a contrast between the amplitude of the sexualized body and the skimpiness and pallor of the socially harnessed body. Twyla's sense of social and physical inadequacy vis-a-vis Roberta, like her representation of her mother's inferiority to Roberta's, signalled Twyla's whiteness to me by articulating a white woman's fantasy (my own) about black women's potency. This fantasy's tenaciousness is indicated by its persistence in the face of contrary evidence. Roberta's mother, the story strongly implies, is mentally rather than physically ill, her capacity to nurture largely fictional; Roberta, who is never actually represented eating, is more vulnerable as an adult to its memory, a weakness on which Twyla capitalizes during their political con-flicts as adults; the tenuousness of the adult Roberta's own maternal status (she acquires stepchildren, rather than biological children, through her marriage to an older man) may also testify figuratively to a lack created by insufficient mothering.

Pivoting not on skin color, but on size, sexuality, and the imagined capacity to nurture and be nurtured, on the construction of embodiedness itself as a symptom and source of cultural authority, my reading installs the (racialized) body at the center of a text that deliberately withholds conventional racial iconography. Even in her reading of this first half of the story, Lula's interpretation differed from mine by emphasizing cultural practices more historically nuanced than my categorical distinctions in body types, degrees of social cool, or modes of mothering. Instead of reading Twyla's body psychologically as white, Lula read Twyla's name as culturally black; and she placed greater emphasis on Roberta's language in the Howard Johnson scene—her primary locution being a decidedly white hippie "oh, wow"—than on the image of her body gleaned by reading envy in the narrative gaze and by assigning racial meaning to such cultural accessories as the Afro, hoop earrings, and a passion for Jimi Hendrix appealed more to white than to black audiences. Roberta's coldness in this scene—she barely acknowledges her childhood friend—becomes, in Lula's reading, a case of straightforward white racism, and Twyla's surprise at the rebuff reflects her naivete about the power of personal loyalties and social movements to undo racial hierarchies.

More importantly, however, this scene was not critical for Lula's reading. Instead of the historical locus that was salient for me—not coincidentally, I believe, since the particular aura of (some) black women for (some) white women during the civil rights movement is being recapitulated in contemporary feminism (as I will discuss later)—what was central to her were scenes from the less culturally exceptional 1970s, which disclosed the enduring systems of racism rather than the occasional moments of heightened black cultural prestige. In general, Lula focused less on cultural than on economic status, and she was less concerned with daughters and their feelings toward their mothers than with these daughters' politics after they are mothers.

When Twyla and Roberta meet in a food emporium twelve years after the Howard Johnson scene, Twyla has married a fireman and has one child and limited income; Roberta has married an IBM executive and lives in luxury in the wealthy part of town with her husband, her four stepchildren, and her Chinese chauffeur. Twyla concludes in

a voice of seemingly racial resentment: "Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world." A short time later the women find themselves on opposite sides of a school integration struggle in which both their children are faced with bussing: Twyla's to the school that Roberta's stepchildren now attend, and Roberta's to a school in a less affluent neighborhood. After Twyla challenges Ro-berta's opposition to the bussing, Roberta tries to defuse the conflict: "'Well, it is a free country.' 'Not yet, but it will be'," Twyla responds. Twyla's support of bussing, and of social change generally, and Roberta's self-interested resistance to them position the women along the bitter racial lines that split the fraying fabric of feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Privileging psychology over politics, my reading disintegrates in the story's second half. Lula's reading succeeds more consistently, yet by constructing the black woman (in her account, Twyla) as the politically correct but politically naive and morally conventional foil to the more socially adventurous, if politically conservative, white woman (Roberta), it problematically racializes the moral (op)positions Morrison opens to revaluation in her extended (and in many ways parallel) narrative of female friendship, *Sula.* Neither reading can account adequately for the text's contradictory linguistic evidence, for if Twyla's name is more characteristically black than white, it is perhaps best known as the name of a white dancer, Twyla Tharp, whereas Roberta shares her last name, Fisk, with a celebrated black (now integrated) university. The text's heterogeneous inscriptions of race resist a totalizing reading.

Source: Elizabeth Abel, "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation," in *Critical Inquiry,* Spring, 1993, pp. 471-98.

Topics for Further Study

Morrison intentionally withholds an important piece of information about Twyla and Roberta. Their racial difference is pivotal to the story, but readers don't know which one is white and which is black. How does this affect your experience of reading and your approach to interpreting the story? Find another example where an author withholds significant information about the characters or events of his or her story. Does the strategy have a similar or different effect in this case?

Many readers may have come to conclusions about Twyla and Roberta's race based on descriptions Morrison offers of their situations and characteristics. List the "clues" or "codes" of race from the text that led you to your conclusion. What kinds of descriptions seem to suggest racial categories indirectly? Then look at the story again and see if you can find evidence to make the opposite argument.

Maggie, the mute kitchen woman, is central to Twyla and Roberta's memories of St. Bonny's and to their relationship to one another. Each makes a different assumption about Maggie's race. Why is Maggie so important and what is the significance of whether she is black or white? Find some information about how racial categories are defined in the United States in contrast to other countries. How does this help you interpret the significance of Maggie's racial designation in the story?

The story is set over a period of more than 20 years, between the late 1950s and early 1980s. Decide which section of the story interests you most and research American race relations during the decade in which it takes place. How does the story's historical context enrich your understanding of Twyla and Roberta's relationship?

American literature offers many examples of interracial friendships, though these friendships are often compromised by unequal power relations. Think of an example of such a friendship from one of the classics of American literature that you are already familiar with. How are the themes of Morrison's story similar or different? Can you imagine how Morrison's story might be understood as a response or an answer to the classic example?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Most children whose parents have died or who cannot care for them live in institutions. Orphanage care has been in decline, however, in the United States since the end of World War II.

1990s: Institutional care has fallen out of favor among childcare experts. Though they still exist in some places, orphanages have not been an important factor in child welfare in the United States for a decade. Foster care or support for continued care within the family is preferred.

1950s: In 1954 the Supreme Court rules that segregation by race in public schools is unconstitutional. Black and white children begin to attend the same schools for the first time in many communities. The new law meets fierce opposition. In 1958 the governor of Arkansas calls for the Little Rock schools to be closed rather than integrated.

1970s: Courts find that "de-facto" school segregation—caused by segregated neighborhoods and school districts rather than intentionally segregated schools—is illegal. In segregated communities across the country courts order crosstown busing to ensure racial integration in public schools. In many cases this leads to protest and outbreaks of violence.

1990s: There is a loss of support for busing among African Americans due to the fact that it has failed to close the gap in academic achievement between black and white students. Courts overturn decisions to desegregate schools by means of busing in favor of more flexible measures such as charter and magnet schools. One study shows that students are one-sixth as likely to choose a friend of a different race than one of their own race.

1970s: In the wake of a 1967 ruling that declared state laws banning interracial marriage to be unconstitutional, interracial relationships, marriage, and offspring become more prevalent.

1990s: The number of interracial marriages has tripled since 1967 and there are over a million biracial families. In 1990 the category "other" is added to the five existing racial categories on the U.S. Census. In 1997 there is a movement to replace "other" with a biracial or multiracial category.

1970s: The phenomenon of gentrification—in which high-income professionals move into rundown neighborhoods and renovate deteriorating buildings—becomes a housing trend. Gentrification results in the rebirth of old neighborhoods but also the displacement of low-income residents.

1990s: Gentrification, which was rampant throughout the 1980s, has slowed, but the displacement of poorer residents is still an issue in many neighborhoods.

What Do I Read Next?

Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families (1985) is an engaging history of the busing crisis in Boston written by J. Anthony Lukas. Focusing on three typical families who have very different relationships to the controversy, Lukas shows the complicated politics of the situation and also allows the readers to feel for those with whom they may disagree.

The Bluest Eye (1970), Toni Morrison's first novel, tells the story of a young black girl growing up in Depression-era Ohio who believes that if she had blue eyes she would be happy. Morrison explores themes of beauty and self respect in a white-dominated culture.

Song of Solomon (1977), another novel by Toni Morrison, traces a young man's struggle for cultural identity against the backdrop of a tragic and magical family history and the shifting racial climate of the mid-twentieth century. This novel won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was chosen for Oprah Winfrey's book club.

The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America (1990) is academic Shelby Steele's collection of controversial and introspective essays on race relations in the wake of affirmative action. Steele combines personal experience and social psychology in his exploration of this hot topic.

Meridian (1976), a novel by Alice Walker, dramatizes the ideas and experiences of the Civil Rights Movement through a Southern black activist named Meridian. Through this heroic woman the drama and conflict of this chapter of American history are brought to life.

Black-Eyed Susans and Midnight Birds (1990), edited by Mary Helen Washington, is an anthology of black women's writing since 1960. It collects twenty stories by the most important and respected black women authors of our day.

Further Study

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* New York: Amistad, 1993.

An extensive collection of reviews and literary critical analyses of Morrison's work from many of the foremost scholars of African-American literature.

Jordan, Winthrop. *White Man's Burden: The Historical Origins of Racism in the United States,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

This short but sophisticated book explores how the idea of race and racial difference took root in the United States and formatively shaped national history.

Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison,* Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

In this collection of previously published interviews Morrison discusses many aspects of her life and work, as well as racial politics and American and African-American literary traditions.

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Baraka, Amiri. Introduction to *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women,* New York: Quill, 1983.

Furman, Jan. *Toni Morrison's Fiction,* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. Introduction to *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present,* New York: Amistad, 1993.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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