Tar Baby Short Guide

Tar Baby by Toni Morrison

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Contents

Characters

As implied in this discussion of social concerns and themes, Morrison's characters usually mark a fine line between the symbolic or allegorical representation of a concept and the psychological or a complex amalgamation of acknowledged and unacknowledged forces motivating them to act, almost as it were independent of their creator. For example, Valerian is simultaneously a stereotype of the insensitive imperialist and a complex individual with deepseated and unresolved psychological dilemmas resulting in a pathological need to control others' lives. This list could be extended greatly, but this section will focus on the protagonist and three characters who bring new themes and concerns to the pages of Tar Baby: the enigmatic and at last unknowable protagonist, the beauty queenturned-abusive mother, and the son who is not coming home for Christmas.

In the "themes" section we examined Jade as an artificial creation, a Tar Baby, but she is also a character with depth and memory. Both of these may be more a curse than a blessing, given her retreat from her roots in African or African-American culture.

Morrison, not content to make Jade an allegorical representation, presents her as a Tar Baby with an unconscious awareness she cannot successfully suppress. Throughout the novel, she is haunted by a vision she had in Paris of a large, very black woman wearing a bright yellow dress and manycolored sandals. This vision, which occurs in a supermarket while Jade is shopping for eastern European delicacies, burdens her throughout the novel. The "woman in yellow," representing everything Jade is trying to escape, is a projection of her unacknowledged guilt at rejecting her culture and its past. She is large, tall and voluptuous, whereas Jade diets to be waif-like in the manner of fashion models; her skin is "like tar" (reminding us of the association between Jade and the Tar Baby of folklore), whereas Jade is "copper." She strolls defiantly through the store, apparently oblivious to the stares of the other shoppers, whereas Jade is obsessed with the effect her beauty has on observers and ways in which a camera can be used to manipulate people's way of seeing her. Most critically, however, this "mother/sister/she; that unphotographable beauty" taunts Jade by holding up three eggs, then spitting in Jade's general direction. The eggs are both folklorically and contextually associated with reproduction, and the woman in yellow reminds Jadine of the degree to which her chosen life has perverted or denied this feminine function. On Valerian's island, she wonders why this "woman's insulting gesture had derailed her—shaken her out of proportion to the incident," and as she flies back to Paris she girds herself to "tangle with the woman in yellow."

This projected contest is the final test of Jade's assimilation into European culture.

The woman in yellow personifies for Jade those things Jade feels guilty about repudiating. Moreover, she is not the sole figure who troubles Jadine as the representation of her abandoned cultural roots. While she awaits Son's return from the estate, after they have run out of gasoline in Street's Jeep, she finds herself in a literal tar pit, a medium resembling quicksand. In this scene, the tar baby motif is re-directed,

in that Jade is now the possible victim of a type of entrapment. While she struggles to locate a root or branch she can cling to until Son returns to free her from the tar into which she is sinking, she sees the trees as inhabited by "swamp women." These fictive women are "delighted" to see her at first; they welcome her as a prodigal. When, however, they realize Jade is struggling to get away, their attitude becomes judgmental.

Like the woman in yellow the swamp women resent the beautiful young woman's struggle to escape, her effort to "be free, to be something other than they were."

The images of sexuality, fecundity, and race coalesce one final time, when Jade accompanies Son to his birthplace, a backward, patriarchic north Florida village. There she learns that Son's dead wife, Cheyenne, was a legend because of her sexuality (one character approvingly remembers her as "the best pussy in Florida," and Jade reads into that coarse epithet a challenge to her own sexuality). After she learns about Cheyenne's memorable sexuality, she tries to compete with the dead woman's legacy.

While she does so, the porch onto which Son has sneaked to be with her fills with other women Jade has known or heard about: her mother, Ondine, Cheyenne, Rosa (her hostess), Therese, Son's mother, and the woman in yellow. While Son sleeps the male post-coital cliche, Jadine feels judged and violated by these women, living and dead, who take "away her sex like succubi."

She is further shocked when each woman deliberately exposes her breasts to Jade, except for the woman in yellow, who "did something more shocking" by showing her the three eggs from the Paris market.

All of these representations, the woman in yellow, the swamp women, and the exposed mothers and lovers in Eloe, are of course projections of Jade's unconscious guilt at moving away from her role as a woman and an African American. These women nurture one another, propagate the species, and are sources of love. Jade is, by this standard, like a whore. Sex is a means of power and aggrandizement for her, reproduction out of the question. She unconsciously realizes that by marrying Ryk and returning to all the Paris jet set represents, she betrays her heritage as a black woman, in both the racial and the gendered implications of that identity. This displacement is suggested by her response to the night women in Eloe: "I have breasts too," but "they do not believe her."

Jadine is thus Morrison's central representation of the malaise of African-American disassociation from the nurturing and responsible roles women can have in the development of modern American culture.

Like her predecessor Nel of Sula (1972), Jade has "graduated" away from her roots, from authenticity. She cannot comprehend the attraction she feels toward Son, the mysterious visitor. But as this analysis has argued, while Morrison positions Jade as the modern "tar baby," an artificial creation of white capitalist culture to distract African Americans from their traditions and values, she is far too much an artist to allow Jade to serve merely as a propaganda figure. What gives Tar Baby its depth and richness is the counter-action of Jade's unconscious resistance, at every turn, her slide away from her

roots and toward acceptance in white Europe. She wills her continued severing of her familial and cultural roots, to be drawn deeper into the artifice of being the European male's ideal woman.

Much like her sinking into the tar pit on Isle des Chevaliers, she is caught in a force she cannot control. The pity of it all is that she will not be able to remain the cover girl; the shelf life of glamor models is pretty short, as younger, prettier, in vogue models capture the camera's eye. What she sold her soul for is a temporary, not a permanent, benefit.

Like Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot (1952), Tar Baby contains a central character who never actually appears in the narrative. Michael, the Streets' son, is the focus of much of the bickering between his parents, and a considerable portion of the plot is dedicated to unraveling the horrid secret behind Michael's reluctance to come home.

As the reader participates in the discovery of Margaret's shameful secret, it becomes certain that her and Valerian's legacy to Michael is one of self-loathing, uncertainty, and an affinity for bandwagon-type causes.

It was Michael who chided Jade for abandoning her roots, but he seems himself to be a reversion to the hippie culture of the 1960s. He lives near a Hopi reservation, has nagged Ondine in the past about the quasiservant status discussed in the "themes" section, and has nebulous plans to become an environmental lawyer. Clearly his commitment to social justice, while admirable in the abstract, contains an element of adolescent reaction against his parents' wealth and life-style. In one very real sense, Michael, cultivating social causes and poets and artists as his friends, is as much a class snob as Jadine or Margaret. As the plot works its way out, it becomes clear that Michael's reluctance to assume the family business or to follow in an approved economic enterprise has been calculated to cast a shadow on Valerian's sense of legacy.

Undoubtedly, Michael's rootlessness and his deliberate absence are direct results of child abuse. Margaret tortured him sadistically when he was a child, and it's small wonder that Michael has no desire to return to L'Arbe de la Croix for Christmas, or for any other reason. Despite his unwillingness to face the truth about his and his family's past, Valerian needs to learn the secret of this reluctance, and that is the novel's principal plot. As readers we can infer that some of Michael's activist life-style is a direct rejection of his father's economic legacy as well as his mother's abuse. He very likely blames Valerian for not putting a stop to his mistreatment, much as Valerian has not completed the process of forgiving his own father for dying. The absent Michael's story is a manifestation of a theme central to many of Morrison's novels, that the evils of the past project into the present and compromise the future.

The evil character of the novel appears initially to be Margaret, Valerian's wife and Michael's mother. She is most often seen from the perspective of Ondine, who has despised for many years the woman she calls "the Principal Beauty of Maine". While Morrison does not excuse Margaret's behavior, she connects it to the alienation of a spectacularly beautiful child in a repressive small-town family that "gave her care but

withdrew attention" as they tried to deal with the anomaly of their only daughter's overwhelming beauty and their economic and social struggle as immigrants in New England. As their small family business prospered, Margaret felt more lonely, but as a teen-age beauty on a parade float, she caught the wealthy older man's eye. She married Street to escape Maine and poverty, to make what capital she could from her only resource, her appearance.

This pattern links Margaret to Jade, and the two women share moments of intimacy based on their ability to understand each other as women whose appearance is their most valuable resource. Morrison attributes Margaret's decision to become pregnant with Michael to a moment when an acquaintance, learning of her humble origins, advised her to "get to work," to consolidate her position in the wealthy family.

After Michael was born, Street, whose style was ever to micromanage Margaret, "put a stop to" her growing closeness to Ondine, insisting that there are fundamental differences between the owners and the help.

Thus, as a young woman with no capital except her beauty, Margaret was isolated in a place that was unfamiliar and left with no company in whom to confide. Feeling powerless, she turned to the most despicable assertion of power imaginable—inflicting pain on a child.

In the novel's "present," Margaret begins to face the consequences of her past.

Her absent-mindedness and her compulsive need to lure Michael to Isle des Chevaliers are driven at least as much by guilt as by love. Her memory lapses, of names and recent events, suggest a more deeply-seated repression of memory. She has smothered her memory of inflicting child abuse and is, therefore, confused and frustrated that her beloved son does everything he can to stay away from her. One important sub-plot of Tar Baby concerns Margaret's coming to terms with her own maternal deviancy.

Convinced that she "was not one of those women in the National Enquirer," or a person whose conduct is fuel for lurid sensationalism, Margaret has to come to terms with the fact that she is indeed a deviant whose conduct could supply fodder for the supermarket tabloids, a pretty woman who married a rich man she did not love, then bore him a son to secure her financial future, and systematically cut tiny incisions into that child's flesh to assert her power over the only person she did not fear as more powerful than she.

A motif central to Margaret's coming toward this self-awareness is her dreaming.

Morrison describes the onset of several of her dreams, but prefaces these by saying that Margaret "did not have the dream she ought to" have. After the Christmas Eve disaster, she is able to experience that dream, but "it was unspeakable." Although Morrison elects not to describe the dream, we can infer that it was a release of repressed memories of abusing Michael. A dream-theory that applies to several of the dreamers in Tar Baby is that we repress our fears and guilt but often symbolize these while we sleep. Coming to terms with the meaning of the dream, then, is a first step

toward psychological recovery. After having the dream she "ought to have," Margaret is able to face her past actions and begin a process of reparation. She tells Valerian that her actions were an excess of love, not, as he had supposed since learning about the abuse, the opposite. It would perhaps be an overstatement to say that Margaret is recovering at the novel's end, and it would be absurd to argue that her bad acts are undone by her regret, but the Christmas Eve catastrophe and the "dream she ought to have" mark a small transformation in this character's life, one that, typically, Morrison does not make explicit when the narrative ends.

By far, however, the most enigmatic character in Tar Baby, and perhaps in all Morrison's fiction, is the protagonist, an "undocumented man" who has many, or perhaps no, names. He may be William Green—at least that is what he tells Jade his birth certificate says— but he repudiates that document by calling himself, generically, "Son." A few critics have associated this name with the Son of God, but this association makes sense only in the narrowest political way and therefore seems, in light of Morrison's professed Christianity, almost to trivialize any possible allusion to the master narrative of redemption. Moreover, Morrison makes a wonderful joke about Son's self-naming, when he wonders what might he call his heir if he and Jade were to become parents: "Son of Son?" Unlike Christ, Son redeems only plants (the hydrangea bloom after he visits the greenhouse), not people. Christ was morally perfect, whereas Son is far short of that ideal.

And this Son killed his wife and her lover.

Morrison introduces this mysterious character as an outlaw, then as the swimmer caught in a mysterious, dangerous current, then as a stowaway on an opulent yacht.

Without any background information, not even a name, readers are inclined to sympathize with this character. By contrast, he trespasses (upon reflection we realize he trespassed on the yacht as well) at L'Arbe de la Croix, stealing food and sneaking about the house, until Margaret finds him hiding in her closet. After Valerian arbitrarily invites Son as a guest, he proves to be talented and productive. He plays a fair jazz piano, attempts to placate Ondine and Sydney, and advises Valerian on folk remedies to control the ants invading the greenhouse or banana leaves as a remedy for Street's aching feet. Moreover, he treats Gideon and Therese with respect for their traditions and beliefs, learning about the island's folklore from them. Finally, he provides a sympathetic voice for Jade after the Christmas Eve disaster, a sympathy that evolves into sexual attraction and perhaps love.

At the same time, Son's principal role at L'Arbe de la Croix is that of an instigator.

When he tries to reconcile with Ondine and Sydney, he implicitly condemns their lifestyle and the degree to which they owe their living to Valerian. More critically, he intrudes on Jade's privacy, watching her while she sleeps and trying to intrude himself into her dreams. A perverse and invasive form of sexual attraction occurs here, and an insidious rasputinism is implied. After the outbreak on Christmas Eve, when she is most vulnerable, he impresses his physical attraction on her by means of a touch, an

impression, that she recalls much later, after he has abused her physically, by beating her, and psychologically, by forcing her to accompany him to Florida, as pure sexual magnetism.

Thus Morrison characterizes Son in three ways that are not easily reconciled. He is a liberator, in that he brings folklore and respect for traditions to a mansion erected to keep them out. By the same token, he offers Sydney, Ondine, and especially Jade an alternative to the cultural "forgetting" that is so central to the book. On the other hand, there is an undeniable element of rasputinism in his relationship with Jade.

While it may be well enough that Son forces Jade to re-think her views about race and gender—and that premise remains to be explored—the undeniable fact is that he works not by persuasion but by charming her to contemplate an opposite she is predisposed to abhor. When she finds herself falling under his magnetism, as he walks nonchalantly and uninvited into her room for the first time, she feels repelled and simultaneously attracted by his hair, and all it represents, both in terms of anthropology and lawlessness: "Wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail.

Uncivilized, reform-school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair."

Although we could certainly argue that this attraction forces Jade emotionally to contemplate ideas and emotions she has suppressed, the novel offers little evidence that she has, or even can, think beyond the Euro-centric box she has chosen for herself.

Moreover, what Son would impose on Jade, the third element he represents in the novel's symbolic triad, is a patriarchic system at least as repressive as the materialism from which he would rescue her. Readers are perhaps inclined to accept as Morrison's own Son's somewhat simplistic descriptions of American capitalism. He sees it as the exploitation of poorer cultures and the producers of waste. He characterizes New York City as "old people in kennels," "childhood underground," and "black girls crying on buses." But readers need to weigh his diagnosis of cultural malaise against his solution. And that solution is represented by Eloe. When he and Jade escape to New York, he demands that their relationship center on his personal past.

This small town in Florida has resisted the pressures of the contemporary United States. Like Shalimar, Virginia, in Song of Solomon or Ruby, Oklahoma, in Paradise, Eloe has built fences against the industrialization of America. Like Ruby, it is a defiantly backward place. Women are valued as sexual objects and have no role in decisionmaking. In fact, the men of Eloe find no crime or even shame in Son's having murdered his first wife, Cheyenne, because she was unfaithful to him. They rejoice in news of Cheyenne's mother's death because she never gave up hope that she might avenge her daughter's murder, knowing as she did that the state of Florida would be happy to drop the matter. Son's return is an effort to re-connect with these roots, to re-establish contact with his father and his friends, and, most critically, to indoctrinate Jade in these conventions as a condition of their growing intimacy. She is appalled by what she sees there. Her photographs of the inhabitants of Eloe, particularly the women, suggest one dimension of the limitations this kind of institution forces upon women. After

she leaves Son, explicitly associating Eloe with a "medieval slave basket," he looks at the photos of the women Jade captured on film while they were in Florida and discovers that the lens interprets them as "stupid, backwoodsy, dumb, dead." Photographs bring us visual manifestations of truths we may never have been able or willing to face.

Like Jade's sealskin coat, Son has a symbolic talisman in Tar Baby, but it is even more multifaceted in its meanings than the coat. Early in their close relationship, Jade asks Son what he wants in life, and his enigmatic answer is his "original dime."

This image, which Son associates with his very first earned money, in the abstract suggests economic self-sufficiency, the core issue in his ongoing critique of the dependence of Sydney and Ondine, or Gideon and Therese, dependence on the largesse of capitalists like Street. Morrison subverts this issue, however, in two important ways.

First, Son recalls the benefits of his treasured "original dime." He bought five cigarettes and a bottle of Dr. Pepper. In addition to the obvious transiency of pleasures like smoking and drinking, there are related health costs.

More empathically, Morrison calls Son's talismanic "original dime" into question when, as she prepares to leave him, Jade hands him a coin from her purse, challenging his notion of economic autonomy and sufficiency, as well as his claim to be above petty material concerns. She tells him her narrative of the origin of the original dime: a "black woman like me" prostituted herself to a "white man for it and then gave it to Frisco [the man who paid Son this dime, and who serves in Son's memory as a model of patriarchic authority] who made you work . . . for it. That's your original dime."

In Jade's interpretation, Son's dime originated in the very center of white power and sexual oppression Son has condemned in her and her family's adaptation. When he returns to Isle des Chevaliers to find Jade, to fight the man whom she's joined, and to force her to come back to him (another patriarchic, even cave-man, intention!) Son has the "pretty shiny" original dime Jade had given him to make him "see the way it was, the way it really was." Apparently he has now accepted her exposure of the myth of economic self-sufficiency, but he has not accepted the reality of the modern world, preferring the old order in which women are to be suppressed and transformed, much as he has insisted on changes in her grooming, her associations, and even her work.

Despite his caveman theories, Therese and Gideon clearly value Son as the only worthwhile member of the Street estate.

They try to persuade him that there is no point in following Jade to Paris, even though Therese momentarily encourages him to murder both Ryk and Jade. She promises to take him to the launch, presumably beginning the journey to the airport, but once at sea, the near-blind Therese encourages him to abandon his quest, to "take a choice."

Insisting, correctly, that Jade has "forgotten her ancient properties," Therese tells Son his best choice is to join the wild horsemen for whom Isle des Chevaliers is named. In the folklore of the black islanders, however, these are not ghosts of French cavalrymen,

as Valerian and his friend Dr. Michelin believe, but the abiding presence of slaves who were blinded the moment they saw the island. Telling Son to "Choose them," the men who "are waiting in the hills for you," who are "naked and . . . blind," Therese—and the reader—leave Son scrambling over the rocks onto the shore, then breaking into a run. Is he returning to his origins? Is he giving up the society that has spurned him, and in which he had no place, not even a Social Security card? Is he running toward the phantom men or away from his uncontrollable attraction toward Jade? Or is he running from Therese and all she stands for?

The novel ends suspending, not answering, these questions. Much as Son's first appearance in the novel is surrounded in mystery, so is his final one and the narrative's close. At the very least, we can say that he has completed the cycle of being an "undocumented man," an alien in modern American culture.

Social Concerns

In many ways, Tar Baby is Toni Morrison's most enigmatic novel. Whereas the narratives that precede it are set in generally realistic American locales, with a dominant focus on the economic hardship and social ghettoization of African Americans, Tar Baby's principal setting is a lush, exotic Carribean island, fully owned by one of the main characters, a retired white businessman. The central characters of Morrison's earlier novels ordinarily seek to escape their folk-culture and post-slave culture origins, but most of the principal black characters in this novel appear to have succeeded in doing this. Finally, the novel employs nonsequential narration, impressionistic scenepainting, and surrealistic, symbolic narrative in a degree unique to this writer's work. The emphasis on an animated nature and the presence of ghosts and spirits prepared Morrison's audience for her masterpiece, Beloved (1986). Many years after its initial publication, Tar Baby remains the most ambiguous, and perhaps the most ignored, of Morrison's novels.

In a degree greater than that of any of her other books, with the possible exception of the stories of Macon Dead I and II in Song of Solomon, this novel concerns itself with issues of proprietorship, commerce, and colonialism, the latter motif comparatively new in Morrison's work. Valerian Street, the owner of the island, inherited a Philadelphia candy-making business and built that enterprise into a sufficiently successful one that allows him to purchase an entire Carribean island for "next to nothing" as his second home and subsequent retirement estate. The low price suggests simultaneously the reduction of nature to a commodity and the exploitation of an impoverished third world country. Valerian believes that wealth and ownership confer power over the material island and all who come into contact with it. For example, he does not take the trouble to learn the names of the islanders who work for him in menial capacities. He calls the washerwoman "Mary," though her name is Maria Therese Foucault.

Valerean and his household call her nephew Gideon, the handyman, "Yardman," thereby subordinating the man's identity to his function within the Street household. He insists that "Mary" do her work in a "washing shed," despite the fact that modern technology and abundant wealth provide for washing machines rather than the washboards of Street's memory. This motif, ownership conferring power that subordinates practical function to illusory appearance, is compounded ironically by the fact that the old-fashioned shed conceals a modern washing machine on which Therese takes care of the white family's laundry. He insists on the facade of the "washing shed" because he recalls the comfort his family's black washerwoman gave him when his father died.

Thus, in his proprietorship of the island, Valerian Street enacts the cliche of the imperialist landed gentry, subordinating the rights and possessions of natives to his personal comfort and whim. For example, he suddenly and summarily fires "Yardman" (Gideon) and "Mary" (Therese) because he believes, contrary to all empirical evidence, that they have stolen some chocolate that is missing from the estate's second kitchen—a redundant room used only for storage and, therefore, a compound symbol of the

excesses associated with materialism. Although everyone in the room when Valerian makes his announcement knows how the candy has come to be missing, he, because of his ingrained imperialist attitude, refuses to listen to anyone's objection and persists in his decision to fire them.

When Ondine, who has worked for the Street family for most of her life, objects despite her personal dislike for "Mary" and "Yardman," Valerian dismisses her too, although he does not follow through on this enraged response. In firing those whom he needs simply because he has the economic power to do so, at the same time denying them the presumption of innocence and due process, Valerian ironically renders himself helpless. He is incapable of washing his clothes, preparing his meals, or even ordering his day.

When he dismisses Ondine, he isolates himself on an island he possesses but does not comprehend. Once again he plays out the colonialist stereotype, arrogantly acting against his own best interest in order merely to assert his control, thereby letting his power supported by wealth take the place of compassion or common sense. Adopting momentarily the unreliable point of view of her mysterious character "Son," Morrison's narrator generalizes Valerian's behavior to represent all colonialist populations: "they could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more and tear up the land and that is why they loved property so, because they had killed it soiled it defecated on it."

Valerian's possession of Isle des Chevaliers is itself a form of economic imperialism.

His family has made its fortune by hawking candy, something that gives pleasure but is not nutritious. That their signature product is a confection called "Valerians" suggests a narcissism Morrison associates with the colonial enterprise. In fact, the candy, although manufactured and distributed in Philadelphia, is a modern American synecdoche (a figure of speech in which the part represents the whole) for economic imperialism, or importing raw materials then using the profits to exploit the very third world laborers who produced the materials.

Street's belief that possession creates control applies to his relationships with his family as well as his staff and the physical island. He micromanages his wife Margaret, insulting her about trivial matters concerning her memory lapses and misuse of the prescribed dinner utensil, all the while operating on the incorrect assumption that Margaret's memory quirks and clumsiness trace to covert drinking—an assumption Valerian never bothers to confirm. His capricious invitation of Son, the mysterious African American she finds hiding in her closet, as a dinner, then a house, guest occurs because he wants to assert his power in the face of his wife's terror and his staff's outrage, not because of any sympathy with the man or his predicament. In fact, Street does not even bother to learn about the man's circumstances before offering the invitation.

The overt symbol for colonialist and materialist excess in the novel is Valerian's greenhouse. His house is itself built on the principles of remoteness and excess, not utility and human need. Designed by an unnamed "brilliant Mexican architect," it has too

much of everything for a household of four people, two of whom are "staff": too many bedrooms, too many baths, too many kitchens. As Morrison notes, except for the main kitchen, which is Ondine's territory, the house "had a hotel feel about it." Obviously it is designed for excess and conspicuousness, even if it is seldom seen, and not for permanent living. Moreover, it features a greenhouse, in which Valerian spends most of his time, listening to classical music and reading mail, having given up books because "the language in them had changed so much." Greenhouses in northern lands, like Pennsylvania, where Valerian was born, serve the purpose of countering the effects of long winters so plants may thrive because human beings manage heat and humidity. In the Carribean, such a function is, like the redundant kitchens and bedrooms of "L'Arbe de la Croix" ("the tree of the cross,"the odd name Valerian chose for his house), redundant. While he cultivates orchids and traditional hothouse flowers, the greenhouse also enables him to grow northern plants like hydrangea, which would perish in the lush, warm soil of the Caribbean. This is yet another instance of controlling nature. Hydrangeas are among the few objects he misses about life in Philadelphia.

Moreover, he hides in the greenhouse from the heat of the day.

Little in Tar Baby, however, is static. One central plot of the novel is the falling apart of Valerian's control or the appearance thereof. Toward the end of the book his manservant Sydney reminds Valerian that "you don't grow nothing in [the greenhouse] anymore." Another amusing example of this loss of control is his shoes. Early in the novel, Sydney insists that the discomfort Valerian experiences in his feet traces to improper footwear, not to disease. He maintains that "Philadelphia shoes don't work in the tropics," and recommends that Valerian wear huaraches or sandals, but the "master" of course refuses to pay any more attention to Sydney's recommendation for his comfort than he does to Sydney's insistence that Margaret's lethargy is not due to alcoholism.

Toward the end of the story, however, control appears to have changed hands.

Sydney has ordered huaraches for Valerian, and he, his wife Ondine, and Margaret have assumed complete control over a virtually helpless Street. The man who asserted control over every aspect of his household's lives has become entirely dependent. According to Ondine, however, Valerian's dependence changes fewer things than it appears to: "Master, patient, baby— it don't matter.

He's still the center of everything." What has happened is that Valerian's dependence has become overt. In the final scene, Sydney literally feeds Street, but at the same time he expresses a mild self-assertion by helping himself, for the first time, to a glass of Street's lunch wine. His response to Valerian's discovery that "Something's happening here" carries a subtly ominous tone: "Don't agitate yourself." The suggestion is that he, Ondine, and Margaret will continue to care for Valerian as they always have, but that the illusion of his control is permanently gone. Perhaps Morrison is suggesting that economic exploitation associated with imperialism in its various guises is fated to self-destruct into overt rather than implicit dependency.

Techniques

As has been suggested throughout this discussion, Tar Baby compares with Beloved, The Bluest Eye, and Jazz as the most experimental of Morrison's novels. Like those books, it is marked by subtle and important changes in the points of view, with consequent shifts in the reader's perspective on characters and events. At every moment we as readers need to be sensitive to the perspective embodied in and surrounding the statements made about the various characters and situations. This shifting point of view allows Morrison to establish simultaneous critical and sympathetic perspectives on her characters. These shifts in turn contribute to the novel's richness as a commentary on the state of race-consciousness in the late twentieth century. At the same time, the shifts cause readers to engage in a process of ongoing re-assessment of their impressions and interpretations of individual characters, to be satisfied with an incomplete theory of the character's meaning, much as in real life people are challenged to re-assess impressions of persons they know and events they witness.

As has also been hinted, the novel begins and ends in mystery. We see Son's going AWOL from his ship, the H.M.S. Stor Koningsgarten, his swim toward freedom, his trespass on the yacht, his anxiety and hunger, all the while knowing nothing at all about the kind of man he is or the conditions of his escape from the oddlynamed British ship. We do not even know enough at the time to wonder what an "undocumented" American is doing as part of the crew of a British ship with a Danish name. While establishing an air of mystery and sympathy for this unknown character, Morrison also establishes a feature central to Tar Baby, the personification of nature. While Son swims away from the Koningsgarten, he is caught in a dangerous current, and his life is threatened. Obviously, his freedom is taken from him because he must submit to the direction in which the current is taking him and struggle to stay afloat. At this point Morrison introducers the first of many personifications,a "water lady" that gently but firmly takes control of him. This personified current is both nurturer and antagonist. If Son struggles against it he will surely drown. When, however, he simply treads water and allows the water lady to guide him, the current "cupped him in the palm of her hand" and led him to the yacht, far out at sea, that is to be the agent of his deliverance and progress toward Isle des Chevaliers. Similarly, Son's return to the island is clouded in mystery. Why does Therese advise him to join the blind slaves. Why does he do it?

In addition to the water lady, Morrison includes several other references to animated nature, most frequently the perspective of the Emperor Butterflies. For exam ple, it is from their point of view that the sealskin coat is associated with the deaths of baby seals. The net effect of this technique is to remind readers that the world people like Valerian hope to possess and transform is in fact a living, vital ecosystem, and any transforming or subduing of nature by human will results in a destruction or at the very least alteration of that animating force.

Finally, Morrison follows the individual characters's dreams throughout the novel.

As was suggested in the "themes" and "characters" sections, this is a way to get us as readers inside the characters. Their dreams are, in fact, their unacknowledged hopes and fears, and by living their dreams, we live their secret lives. An excellent analytical exercise might be to trace the dream of characters to see what these dreams tell us about the characters' unconscious minds.

Some of the characters' dreams appear to be static, whereas others' dreams change.

This promises to be a valuable index to the growth and development of the individual characters.

Themes

At the core of Tar Baby, like most of Morrison's novels, is the need for African Americans to reconcile their African roots with their historically forced immersion in Euro-American culture. The apparent accommodation between the Streets' economic power and the reduction to an economic function of both island black people and the servant family explode under the force of the mysterious visitor, Son, who challenges everyone's assumptions about the Streets' economic authority and the compromises the two couples, Sydney and Ondine, on the one hand, and Therese and Gideon, on the other, have made to participate in the economic bonanza that flows from the white family's prosperity. As in many of her works, Morrison's chief thematic concerns deal with the characters' acceptance of their AfricanAmerican roots, as well as with the consequences of falling away from those origins.

At the extreme in "assimilation" to white culture is the novel's central character, Jadine, or Jade, Childs, who spends the Christmas holidays with her aunt Ondine and uncle Sydney, who took her in when Ondine's sister died. Stunningly beautiful (she's contemptuously called "that yella" or mulatto by Therese), Jade's photograph has graced the cover of fashion magazines.

She has moreover completed course work toward an advanced degree in art history in Paris, where she lives surrounded by an international jet set. She's thus dislocated from the culture of her ancestors in several obvious ways. As a fashion model, she has the approval of white culture, even becoming, as "the Copper Venus," a standard for classical beauty and an implicit sexual norm or standard. The "Copper Venus" epithet is perhaps Morrison's allusion to "the Black Venus," a title the Paris crowd imposed on jazz great Josephine Baker when, in 1926 in her late teens, she danced provocatively at La Revue Negre. An orphan, Jade owes her upbringing to Ondine and her education to her aunt's employer, Valerian Street. During the "present" time of the novel, Jade spends the holiday season with her aunt and uncle, resting from her work as a model and thinking about her future, which probably includes marriage to the Scandinavian-born Ryk.

Her fiance's gift, a very expensive sealskin coat, points symbolically toward the ever-increasing disconnection between Jadine and her ancestral folk culture. Its total irrelevance in the tropics suggests the impropriety of her contemplated marriage, which may well result in her increasing alienation from her cultural roots. Moreover, in a motif that runs throughout Tar Baby, Morrison deconstructs the sealskin coat to remind us of its role in representing human rapacity over nature, thereby reiterating Son's image of Euro-centric culture as "defecating" on the world and Street's claims of "ownership" of the island by reminding us how many animal lives were sacrificed to create the luxurious garment: "the hides of ninety baby seals stitched together so nicely you could not tell what part had sheltered their cute little hearts and which had cushioned their skulls." Jade's explicit sexual displacement, when she lounges naked on the fur coat in the tropic heat, becomes a supporting symbol for the degree to which she has bought into and has become a creation of capitalist culture and of the complex associations of

economic exploitation and human sexuality in colonialist societies. After the trauma of the Christmas dinner altercation and her trips to New York and Eloe, Florida, with Son, Jade clings to the coat while she flies first-class back to Paris, presumably to Ryk and the life he represents (she has, however, told Margaret Street that she does not plan to marry him, but her clinging to the coat suggests otherwise): a life in which Jade will continue to build walls between herself and the culture she repudiates to claim success in the white, in this case European as well as Euro-centric, world.

The process of Jade's cultural displacement and her active role in it are also suggested by her education. The costs have been paid by her aunt's employer; consequently, Jade feels indebted to him. Although this is a reasonable position for her to take, it becomes clear by the end of the novel that she does not feel comparable indebtedness to her aunt, who took her in, cared for her when she became an orphan, and is indirectly responsible for the many benefits she's received from Valerian. For example, Ondine and Sydney had "gotten Valerian to pay her tuition while they sent" her living expenses. The ambiguity of the word "gotten" implies that Valerian did not volunteer to underwrite Jade's education, that he may have been mildly coerced. After she has returned to the island from the States, her aunt painfully lectures Jade on her abandoning gender as well as cultural traditions: "if [a woman] never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: . . . good enough even for the respect of other women."

Jadine, who has succeeded in white society by embracing its values, is incapable of authentic love for her adopted family, Sydney and Ondine.

The artificiality and self-centeredness of Jade's love for Ondine are symbolized by the Christmas gifts she brings her aunt: high-heeled, jeweled shoes that are in direct opposition to Ondine's domestic obligations and more importantly that are an insult to her aunt's aching feet. Ondine wears the shoes only once, during the catastrophic Christmas party that forms the novel's climax. Like the coat Ryk gave Jade, her gift to her aunt points to a "generic" property in her affection for the woman who has done so much for her. The shoes represent the world of high fashion in which Jade has triumphed, but they are almost abusive to her aunt's pained feet, wounded by years of domestic service that is the real basis for Valerian's generosity in educating her.

That education, as Son diagnoses when he and Jade argue in New York, is a benefit with a condition attached. In his rage, Son shouts, "White people love obedience . . .

You did what you were told, didn't you?"

Although the connection is never explicit, and although Jade does not acknowledge that the condition exists, obedience has been the implicit basis for Sydney's and Ondine's employment within the Street household.

Whatever its motivation, Valerian's educational largesse has had the effect of distancing Jadine from her African and American roots. She studies European art and values it above African or African-American creativity, believing the latter imitative and shallow.

When she recalls how Michael, the Streets' son, questioned the legitimacy of her choice of European art as her area of study, rather than social activism, Jade ruminates in a defensive condemnation of Afro-centric thought: "the American Blacks were at least honestly awful; the black artists in Europe were a scandal. The only thing more pitiful than their talent was their pretensions."

Clearly, then, Morrison implies by her creation of the "Copper Venus" the perils of abandoning one's cultural heritage for worldly success. In several respects, Jade is the "tar baby" of the title. In fact, Son, while waiting for her to arrive in New York, explicitly condemns her as a "tar baby sideof-the-road whore trap" and tells her a corrupted version of the tar baby story while quarreling with her after they return from Florida to New York. The folklore, which will be discussed in the "Literary Precedents" section, deals with an artificial creature created solely to trap a rabbit by tricking him. Jade is a creation of white culture, both in her education and in her acceptance of the terms and conditions of success in modern America and Europe. As Street's "creation," she has been placed in a position to capture the heart of Son, the character who allies directly with his African roots.

Important as it is, Jade's narrative is not the sole example of betraying one's African-American roots to gain success in the United States. Her aunt and uncle probably inculcated in her the values of domestic servants when they took her in. Ondine has kept Margaret's horrible secret, that she abused her son, over the years, and clearly this is not because she likes Margaret— quite the contrary. She despises "the Principal Beauty of Maine," and she resents her perverted relationship with Michael. But like cinematic care-givers all the way back to Hattie McDaniel's "Mammy" in Gone With the Wind, Ondine has taken over the role of nurturer when the white mother is unable to do so: "I loved that little boy like he was mine," and "I stand on my feet thirty years so [Margaret] wouldn't have to."

Perhaps at the end of the novel Ondine has become aware of the price of thirty years' relative security. She and Sydney have a modest amount of capital, but no estate. As Sydney realizes after the Christmas dinner, they have a little stock "but no savings. Just the promise of being taken care of in the will of a man whose wife his own wife had slapped." The problem is that such knowledge cannot result in freedom or transformation. Now fully aware of their economic dependance, they may regret the past, but they must do the best they can to negotiate some kind of deal with the man who's still completely in control of their economic future, now that they're too old to begin anew.

Even more directly than Ondine, Sydney represents the price of accommodation for material comfort. He prides himself on being a "genuine Philadelphia Negro," who as a young man moved deliberately to the city where he could become "one of those industrious Philadelphia Negroes—the proudest people in the race." What Morrison's irony suggests is complex. Sydney has indeed achieved success by means of selfdiscipline and industry. He has, however, failed to become free. At the end of Tar Baby, Sydney and Ondine would prefer to return to Philadelphia, the city with which they associate their status, which, in their misguided view, elevates them above other African

Americans. They cannot, however, influence Valerian to spend time in Pennsylvania, and they have no resources with which to go there themselves. It is hardly a surprise that Sydney's most violent response is to Son's intrusion. He wields a revolver, threatens mayhem, and resents Street's unexpected invitation to dinner. In his eyes, Son is a threat to his race-concept as a "Philadelphia Negro" and a reminder to the Streets that he and Ondine, despite their polished, deferential manners, are from the same slave-culture as the unkempt, menacing, glowering presence Margaret has found in her closet. Sydney's "victory" in the final greenhouse scene, in which he helps himself to Street's wine and insists that Street wear huaraches, must ring hollow indeed.

He now manages the daily routines of Valerian's life and treats himself to a sip of Chablis—a sad commentary on the value of thirty years of dedicated service and selfdenial. Still bound to the near-helpless Valerian, Sydney is free in neither the economic nor the political sense. He cannot leave, cannot declare his independence, and must continue to serve the whims of another.

Key Questions

Most discussions focus on the tone, or the ways in which Morrison suggests we should view her principal characters. This analysis suggests a "double" view, but the position from which one proceeds in reading Tar Baby could challenge this view. For example, is Jade to be pitied as a victim of two repressive cultures, which limit her options on the basis of both race and gender? Is she doing the best she can under these circumstances?

1. How do you explain Jade's attraction to Son, both when she first sees him and after he becomes abusive? Is the notion of his sexual magnetism sufficient to account for her turning her back on her aunt and uncle, Ryk and Paris, and her dreams?

2. Similarly, what explains Son's attraction to Jade? She is beautiful, but he tries to change her appearance as soon as they become lovers. Moreover, he tries to insert himself "into her dreams" before he had even spoken to her. Does this suggest attraction or something more mysterious?

3. What waits for Jade when she gets to Paris? Is she lying when she tells Margaret she does not plan to marry Ryk?

4. Do you think Jade can be the same as she is before meeting Son, whatever happens when she goes back to Paris?

5. How do you interpret Therese's powerful hatred for Jade? How can we account for her demand that Son, if he does not murder Ryk and Jade, become one of the blind slaves?

6. What are we to make of Son's following Therese's instructions at the novel's end?

Is he returning to his origins? Is he repudiating finally the society that has spurned him and in which he has no place? Is he running toward the phantom men or away from his attraction toward Jade? Could he be running from Therese and all she stands for?

7. Do your sympathies shift toward Valerian as he becomes progressively helpless at the novel's end? As he has to come to terms with his own failure to protect Michael from Margaret? Or Margaret from herself? Why or why not?

8. Where do you think Sydney and Ondine are at the end of the novel? Note that in her final conversation with Jade, Ondine kills a lobster because she is "in a mood for death." What accounts for this rage?

Is her outburst to Jade, about a daughter's responsibilities, really motivated by anger with Jade, or are other causes at work here?

9. Does the fact that Gideon and Therese take pride in knowing Son, in showing other inhabitants of the island that they know "the American" (and Gideon's pride in having

lived in America) compromise their roles as "romantic primitives" and victims of the imperialist Valerian Street?

10. Do the stories of Margaret's past prepare us for the horrid secret she's concealed, even from herself? Is she on the way to recovery, or is she still lying to herself, at the end of the novel?

Literary Precedents

Tar Baby is a breakthrough novel for its author, summarizing her concern with accepting ancestral heritage by African Americans, as this theme announced itself in The Bluest Eye. Like that novel, Morrison works with a variety of perspectives, moving confidently and subtly around her subject while never falling into the trap of direct polemic.

Like Sula, the novel positions competing responses to the pressure to conform to and assimilate European-American culture by the descendants of slaves, and the novels feature a character whom we both admire and mistrust. Sula Pierce and Son are ruthless killers. But Morrison insists that we respect the autonomy of their positions, the degree to which their stubbornness poses a criticism of the compromises other characters make. The emphasis on spirits, animated nature, the swamp women, the women who people Jade's vision, and the ghosts of blind slaves looks backward toward the presence of ghosts and persons possessing magical powers in Son of Solomon, and forward to the great ghost novel of the twentieth century, Beloved. Finally, the village of Eloe in Tar Baby prepares us as readers for the central location of Morrison's grand novel of deliberate walling-out of the influence of mainstream culture, Paradise.

The literary tradition central to Tar Baby is, however, the title's allusion to a narrative from plantation culture, although certain scholars argue that the story has deeper origins in African "trickster" tales as these were adapted during slave times. The best known version of the story is Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings (1881). In Harris's version, an offended "Brer Fox" fashions a Tar Baby to trap "Brer Rabbit." After constructing the Tar Baby, Brer Fox places it in the middle of the road.

When the Tar Baby does not respond to Brer Rabbit's greeting, the rabbit strikes the artificial creature repeatedly, each time getting himself more thoroughly stuck. When all four of the rabbit's feet are attached to the Tar Baby, the fox assumes power over him. While the story goes on to tell how Brer Rabbit gets free by his own guile, and thereby the story becomes a "trickster" tale, Morrison's main emphasis remains with the artificial creation, like Jadine, built to fool and entrap others. The strength of her novel, however, is its building on the story of the tar baby. Her heroine, Jadine, although severely flawed, has a conscience she cannot quite escape.

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