Decoding Racial Identity of the Characters in “Recitatif”*

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“Recitatif” is Toni Morrison’s only published short story which explores how the relationship between the two main characters is shaped by their racial difference. Morrison does not reveal which character is white and which is black. Decoding the racial identity of each character is important to discover how each race defines their own status in the society and reveal how the black female reconstruct their identity with the feminist movement in a white and male dominated society. In this paper, the racial identity of the main characters is explored by analyzing the culture, political, and economic signs hidden in the story.

Keywords: decoding, racial identity, cultural signs, “Recitatif”

Introduction

“Recitatif” (1983) was written by renowned African American female author Toni Morrison (1931- ). In her work, Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. Besides revealing the hurt caused by racial discrimination and segregation to the black women, she has also described their inner psychological world twisted by the dominated white society.

“Recitatif” is Twyla’s narrative of her long-term relationship with Roberta, another eight-year-old who shares her failing grades and “not real orphan” status at St. Bonaventure’s, the shelter where they live for a few months. The two girls become fast friends despite the discomfort due to their situation, their problematic mothers, and their racial differences. They also share a serious moment, in which they watch bigger girls’ assault Maggie, a disabled woman who works in the institution’s kitchen. Later the two girls meet by accident four more times. Each time they meet, they reminisce about what has happened in their lives, but also return to the defining moment of Maggie, arguing about what really happened and what role they played.

The story explores how the relationship between the two main characters is shaped by their racial difference. Morrison does not reveal which character is white and which is black. Rather than delving into the distinctive culture of African Americans, she illustrates how the difference 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 emphasizes the readers’ complicity in this process. Decoding the racial identity of each character is important to discover how each race defines their own status in the society and reveal how the black female reconstruct their identity with the feminist movement in a white and male dominated society. In this

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Decoding the Racial Identity of Twyla and Roberta

As with any piece of literature, in order to understand a story, the reader must develop within his/her mind, a visual image of each character that is presented. This image, of course, is different for each reader, and can never be exactly as originally envisioned by the writer. Characters become composites of the reader’s own acquaintances and memories of particular personality types that he/she has encountered in his/her lifetime. As a story develops, so might the characters within the story. Normally, we are provided with physical descriptions of characters so that we can at least come close to the same image that the author originally had intended. But, in Morrison’s “Recitatif”, the two main characters’ physical descriptions are purposely left out therefore leaving their identities completely to the imagination of the beholder. Through discovering the cultural, political, and economic signs in the story, the reader can identify the racial identity of the characters.

Decoding the Characters’ Names

As part of American culture, African American culture is the great contributions of African ethnic groups to the culture of the United States. It has distinct identity which is rooted in the historical experience of the African American people. Although Morrison did not reveal the racial identity of each character in “Recitatif”, the readers can penetrate into the inside world of the protagonists by analyzing the cultural clues given by Morrison. The words that Morrison selects from her palette are an extremely important part in the overall picture. Equally important, are Morrison’s choice of the character’s names and the situations that develop within the story.

The name of the protagonists arouses the curiosity of the readers to uncover their racial identity. One protagonist’s name is Twyla, the narrator. The reader may ask the question: Is Twyla a name usually assigned to black girls or white girls? It sounds black, but from the novel we have known that Twyla’s mother “danced all night” (Morrison, 1983, p. 243), who could name her daughter Twyla, because “There would be a less-than-sticking-to white traditions attached to her” (Harris, 2006, p. 111). About the occupation of Twyla’s mother, the readers may argue being a potential stripper is more a black occupation than a white occupation. Or maybe Twyla’s mother is white but she is reduced to such an occupation by class difference. The cultural stereotypes keep appearing in the story and the readers keep reading, watching, and working hard to uncover the real racial identities. This work continues with the other protagonist, Roberta. Is the name typical for black or white? Roberta may be black, because her last name Fisk is the name of a black university. The readers cannot get a conclusion of the racial identity by the name of protagonists, but Morrison also rendered other cultural signs.

Decoding the Characters’ Situations

Twyla starts the narrative of Morrison’s provocative story “Recitatif” by recalling her placement as an eight-year-old child in St. Bonventure, a shelter for neglected children, and her reaction to Roberta Fisk, the roommate she is assigned: “The minute I walked in and the Big Bozo introduced us, I got sick to my stomach… 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” (Morrison, 1983, p. 243). Most readers have the impression that African American hair is typically composed of tightly coiled curls and it is difficult for them to wash the hair everyday. This can also
show the racial discrimination of white people towards black people. “Smell funny” indicates Twyla’s first impression of Roberta who is a black girl. When Twyla has seen the living condition in the shelter, she said: “My mother won’t like you putting me in here” (Morrison, 1983, p. 243). Twyla initially expresses the view that her mother would not want her sharing the room with Roberta due to their racial difference—one girl is white and the other is African American, although the text never makes clear what each girl’s race is.

**Decoding Other Cultural Signs**

Throughout the story, every brushstroke that Morrison uses to develop the two characters and their mothers, can work for identifying race. When the girl’s mothers visit them for Easter, Twyla describes her mother as wearing “... those ugly green slacks I hated… and that fur jacket with the pocket linings…” (Morrison, 1983, p. 246). She then describes Roberta’s mother: “I looked up it seemed for miles. She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I’d ever seen” (Morrison, 1983, p. 247). This description is one we stereotypically associate with large and strong black women. Later, when the girls have grown up and they meet in the Howard Johnson’s where Twyla is a waitress, Twyla describes Roberta as: “She was sitting in a booth smoking a cigarette with two guys smothered in head and facial hair. Her own hair was so big and wild I could hardly see her face” (Morrison, 1983, p. 249). “Hair is an outward expression of culture and heritage. In the search for the African American identity, blacks have undergone many different changes in hairstyle”.1 Maintaining facial hair is more prevalent among African American men than in other male populations in the US.2 One can easily visualize Roberta as black from her hair style. During this meeting, Twyla finds out that they are all on their way to the coast because one of the men has an “appointment with Hendrix” (Morrison, 1983, p. 249). But Twyla has no idea who Jimi Hendrix is, which suggests that Twyla is an uninformed and uninterested white girl. “Twyla’s sense of social and physical inadequacy vis-à-vis Roberta signaled Twyla’s whiteness by articulating a white woman’s fantasy about black women’s potency” (Abel, 1993, pp. 473-474).

Pivoting not on skin color, but on size, description of clothes, and other cultural signs, on the construction of embodiments itself as a symptom and source of cultural authority, this article installs the racialized body at the center of a text that deliberately withholds conventional racial iconography. (Abel, 1993, p. 474)

**Decoding the Economic Signs**

“The reader, black, white, or other, becomes a character or participant in the racialist complications that have been set up by the narrator and her ambiguous use of language” (Bennett, 2001, p. 212). When Twyla and Roberta meet in a food emporium 12 years after the Howard Johnson scene, Twyla has married a fireman and has one child and limited income; Roberta has married an IBM (International Business Machines Corporation) 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” (Morrison, 1983, p. 252). 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

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1 For more information about hair style of African American people, see “African American hairstyles”. Available at http://alpha.dickinson.edu/departments/amos/mosaic01steel/jc/hair.html

challenges Roberta’s opposition to the bussing, Roberta tries to defuse the conflict: “‘Well, it is a free country.’ ‘Not yet, but it will be.’” (Morrison, 1983, p. 256), 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. According to Harris (2006):

By baring the women’s racial prejudices during the school desegregation incident, Morrison debunks her initial thesis that race does not matter. Absence of racial markers aside, black and white human beings on American soil seem incapable of peaceful coexistence without tension based on race. (p. 115)

Decoding the Racial Identity of Maggie

By forcing us to construct racial categories from highly ambiguous social cues, “Recitatif” elicits and exposes the unarticulated racial codes. To emphasize the cultural specificity of these codes, Morrison writes into the text a figure of racial undecidability: Maggie, who is the mute kitchen girl at St. Bonaventure? In the text, Morrison (1983) only mentioned her skin color—sandy color and her legs are “like parentheses” (p. 245). For both girls, she is a hated reminder of their unresponsive mothers, Maggie is not black to Twyla; 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.

Who is Maggie, and what does she mean to the text of “Recitatif” and to Twyla and Roberta? Maggie is just as racially unknowable, finally, as are Twyla and Roberta. However, at the beginning, many believe she is black, and that belief assigns her value for them. Maggie is the ugly outcast, the foil for Twyla and Roberta. Maggie is the character about whom Twyla and Roberta can believe no one cares, for even they are not as isolated as she appears to be. To them, Maggie can suffer their insults and cruelty, because she somehow deserves it. Maggie is the site on which Twyla and Roberta can exercise their mob psychology, their desperation. Maggie enables powerless people to feel powerful. In beating and kicking Maggie, the gar girls act out what they believe is a racial drama. Whether Maggie is black or not, both Twyla and Roberta are intent upon denying her humanity by stepping over her body into another state of being. And perhaps that is one of Morrison’s points. If people can treat each other so cruelly at such an early age, whether they are certain of their racial identity or not, then race does not make any difference. The violence is constant. On the other hand, if Roberta was black and thought that Maggie was black and still wanted to kick her, then it suggests about interracial prejudice. If Twyla is the black character, her desire to kick Maggie suggests about her conscious denial of her own identity. If Twyla is the white character, it suggests about her willingness to deny the humanity of the black people.

Morrison’s short story creates parallel between our confusion and Twyla’s and Roberta’s confusions over their racial identities. As the tragic figure in the story, Maggie highlights the role that language plays in determining who we are and how others react to us. Because her race is passionately debated by Twyla and Roberta—and in much the same way that readers of the story may debate the racial identities of the girls—Maggie becomes representative of the text itself, specifically symbolic of “Recitatif” and its removal of all racial codes.

Conclusions

“Recitatif” invites the reader to examine the reading process by fixing racial identity in relationship to the
concern to fix Maggie’s identity. It allows the reader to read the codes according to our conditioning and then asks us to examine that. In asking the readers to become participants in the creation of story, in both the delineation of character identities and in what their racial complexion signifies, “Recitatif” asks the readers to be active and not passive. It is a story about the construction of stories, a fiction that turns outward to challenge. This gives the readers a sense of involvement and possibility. It is not, therefore, the friendship between Twyla and Roberta that holds hope; it is, instead, this new kind of fiction that requires our participation, promising wonderful opportunities for epiphanies that are no longer about theme or character but about the reading process itself.

References