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Sandbox Essay

Recitatif/Rhetorical Narrative Theory

Toni Morrison's *Recitatif* conveys rhetorical narrative theory in the way in which the character is speaking. Not only is dialogue a key component in terms of the narrative, but also in how the text feels as if the reader is stepping into the main character's personal journal. The text centers around two girls and how through their differences they are forced to navigate a newer world, the realm of foster care. Morrison uses ambiguity to incite critical thinking in terms of which character is who when it comes to race. *Recitatif* is a rhetorical studies dream as it delineates the fine lines between cultural and socioeconomic differences. There's beauty in the language of the text and how the text is structured. Morrison depicts hardship, and race in a way that pulls the reader in, making the main characters, Roberta and Twyla relatable in their naivety.

Language and structure play a role in the indeterminacy of the text. There's sort of this real world, harsh tone that Morrison uses to convey relationships between characters and situations. Though the text was written in the 80's there are elements that carry over today such as, slurs, how Church is depicted, as well as untactful behavior and thoughts of a child. There's also language in the separation of the orphans and how amongst themselves there's this line being drawn between "a real orphan" as opposed to one that may have a parent come back for them. However, Roberta and Twyla bond over the way in which they both have an unspoken understanding of each other, and that's another way in which language plays a role. Morrison uses descriptive words to display indeterminacy throughout the text. "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.” This description plays on the ambiguity of which character is which race, also the use of the terms salt and pepper make it difficult as well. One could read the text believing that Roberta is white and that Twyla is black, but the reader could also infer vice versa. Another way that Morrison uses indeterminacy is in the relationships that each girl has with her mother. The reader comes in sort of in the middle of the story, and throughout the text the reader is thrown into the estranged relationships between them, the reader can only infer why the mothers are the way they are, or why the relationships are estranged. The line, “A pretty mother on Earth is better than a beautiful dead one in the sky even if she did leave you all alone to go dancing” depicts the struggle Twyla is facing between the relationship with her mother and how she views her. The reader can infer from this line alone that though Twyla is embarrassed by her mother, she’s proud to have one.

According to Phelan, narrative is rhetoric because narrative occurs when someone tells a particular story for a particular audience. Morrison uses the perspective of a child to tell her story, relating it to a much older audience, an audience that can decipher hardship and in a sense grief, in a way allowing the reader to put themselves in the characters’ place, and understand specific instances. The rhetorical narrative in *Recitatif* is equally profound as it is heartbreaking, expounding on the idea of no matter age, race or gender, the only barriers outside of speaking language, are societal constructs passed down from generation to generation. There is emphasis on what is understood between two people, is understood regardless of how society may influence it.