

Reader Response Sandbox

In "Recitatif," a short story by Toni Morrison, ambiguity immediately arises in terms of the details of the main characters, Roberta and Twyla. It is clear they both come from troubled homes and are placed into a girls home called St. Bonaventure's. They are of similar age, social standing, and personality. As they grow up and leave St. Bonny's, they end up in losing touch as lots of childhood relationships do. They come into contact again over the years, but it is never quite the same as an innocent young child friendship. However, throughout the entirety of the story, neither girl's race is ever explicitly stated. While it is known that one girl is white and the other is black, the specifics are never revealed. In doing this, Morrison draws on the reader's natural response to various racial terms and even racial stereotypes to draw the reader in one direction or the other in attempting to determine the race of each girl.

When the girls are first introduced, Roberta says that she immediately got "sick to her stomach" upon seeing her new roommate, Twyla. She explains that while her mother may not be good as a nurturing role, "every now and then... she told me something important." Morrison's first racial stereotype comes into play as Roberta claims that her mom used to tell her that "they never washed their hair and smelled funny." Without relaying her race, Morrison has delivered two stereotypes simultaneously and left it up to the reader to bring a meaning out of the phrase. First,

“they” could be black people due to the stereotype that they have a certain smell to them and that is because they don’t often wash their hair. On the other hand, Morrison is also implying that she Twyla is just a poor, dirty white girl that smells funny and doesn’t shower often enough because her mother doesn’t care. While Twyla being black here might seem like the clearer response, it is not the only one. Various readers with different life experience are going to contract different meanings out of this specific moment.

However, when the mothers get a chance to come and visit their girls, Morrison puts a heavier emphasis on the idea that Twyla is actually black and Roberta is actually white. When Twyla’s mother sees her for the first time, “she dropped to her knees and grabbed” her in her “tight slacks”, yelling “Twyla, baby! Twyla, baby!” Then later on, when Roberta attempts to introduce their mothers, her mom completely brushes off Twyla’s mom without so much as a hello. This plays into the stereotype that black women tend to be over the top and try to attract attention for themselves, while white women wouldn’t want to associate themselves with such ridiculousness. Morrison is also implying that Roberta’s mom is not only a white woman, but a racist white woman. While this may be a clearer distinction, Morrison still allows the reader to draw in their own response to her story.

Finally, they meet a couple times later on in life. Once, Roberta comes in with some friends into a bus stop where Twyla is a waitress. While she is here, she acts as if her and Twyla never really were friends, and that there connection is not worth acknowledging in front of these people. When they run into each other again at a

grocery store years later, Twyla brings this incident up. Roberta simply claims that Twyla should “know how it was in those days, black-white.” Here, it is easy for a reader to assume that Roberta ignored Twyla because she didn’t want her white friends to know she had this life-long connection with a black woman. As white men could be extremely critical of such a connection, Roberta assumed it to be safer to downplay this relationship, and tell Twyla she she should just “know” and understand the reasons for her doing.

Overall, there is never one singular definitive moment where Morrison admits that Twyla is black and Roberta is white, or vice versa. The entire story is comprised of moments that call upon the reader to draw on their own experiences and even their own racial biases to determine the race of these girls throughout their lives. Morrison explicitly denies the reader the right to this knowledge in order to force them to explore and acknowledge their personal thoughts.