

Tianna Tatum-Fisher

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Dr. Buchholtz

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***Recitatif: A Reader-Response on Racial Distortion***

Toni Morrison's short story, "Recitatif" takes the word from opera in which the formal singing stops and a character belts in a more conversational speech to impart information. The narrator of Morrison's short story, Twyla, shares her life from childhood into adulthood in a very casual manner of which is shown through pure dialogue between her and the story's secondary protagonist, Roberta. Morrison makes it quite clear that the two characters cannot be distinguished by race despite Twyla mentioning they looked like salt and pepper, therefore making one of them African American "black" and the other, Caucasian "white". However because Morrison mentions the phrases, "salt and pepper" and "a whole other race" at the very beginning the topic of race becomes the center focus of the story. This forces the reader to look at the characters' lives in order to understand and side with them about their future paths.

Although as the reader continues on within the story the racial makeup of the characters becomes questionable. However Morrison makes a point through this story about how human beings categorize each other. The story's use of racial distortion showcases how humans project their bias views of each other and categorizes the *other*, the outsider, the different.

Twyla's name suffix *la* means the feminization of the word "twy" which means two or double. In a way Morrison could be alluding to the interwoven lives of the two girls, but as well to the double consciousness at play within the story. As double consciousness refers to understanding another's life, particularly someone of another race through their eyes with pity and contempt, the question of race is evident through the two characters treatment of the mute,

child-like orphanage kitchen worker, Maggie whose unforgettable parentheses shaped (bowlegged) legs is to emphasize her questionable race as such the protagonists could not remember whether she was black or white. Due to the characters in the end trying to recollect what race Maggie was this forces the reader to go back in the story to try and piece together what race Twyla and Roberta are. Roberta concludes *Recitatif* by asking the question, “What the hell happened to Maggie?” As Maggie is the stand in for race and the treatment of someone different “the other” this question can be a direct query to the audience (reader) inquiring of why do humans, in this case, Americans, put an emphasis on race? It further stands in place of discerning the social and racial structure of the American mindset. The paradoxical writing of race forces the reader to analyze the use of stereotypes as it helps not only to identify, but acknowledge how the lesser (the other) is seemed to be dictated over.

When reading *Recitatif* the reader’s own self-identified racial background will play a part in the interpretation of the characters’ races, by only being able to identify with the racial stereotypes. In this story all stereotypes are subjective. For instance when Twyla (presumed black) first met Roberta, she recalled her mother (Mary) stating “they” meaning white people “never washed their hair and smelled funny.” In opposition hair, particularly black hair has had a very racially disturbed history in America. African American hair has been criticized since slavery into the present as being unkempt, but it remains noted that black hair requires a lot of caring and styling of, so Mary’s prejudice concerning white hair and body odor could work in reverse if Roberta’s mother said it, although it would have been seen as overt racism than minute prejudice.

Furthermore Morrison continued to let the reader decide who was what race when Twyla first met Roberta many years later in the diner when she stated her friend had a meeting with the

famous black guitarist, Jimi Hendrix and Twyla didn't know who he was. Twyla described Roberta as wearing "earrings the size of bracelets" (hoops) commonly worn by minority communities. Even more so Roberta is described as having hair "so big and wild" commonly known as an Afro. Roberta wearing hoops and an Afro could be symbolic of the 70s/80s racial and cultural integration, but also could pose the idea that Roberta is black. Morrison writes that one is black and the other is white, yet it could stand to reason that Roberta is a very light-skinned woman who passed as white. The true complications of race distortion was apparent during Twyla and Roberta's argument over their children's schooling during desegregation. However their clash was in part to how Roberta ignored Twyla in the diner and said that blacks and whites didn't associate with each other in a friendly manner, despite Twyla saying they did.

In all Morrison created a story that plays on reader's emotions, judgment, and obvious perceived ideas on race. Because the work focuses on dialogue and point of view limited to Twyla the story is one sided. If there was a break from Twyla's life to show Roberta's the reader would have a better understanding of the characters, particularly their race, but that is the whole point of the story. However the fact that the characters were able to come back together after a heated argument acknowledges the work that must be done between races in order to heal and move on from prejudice.