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**Narrative Technique
in
Toni Morrison's
Novels**

A Thesis Submitted for
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in American Literature

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The main interest of the present thesis is *not* to prove whether or not a writer consciously follows specific models. The aim is to prove that by analytically applying different models to the writer's works it is possible to trace his/her technical development and how close it is to thematic content. In Morrison's case, the models used in this thesis are applied to her novels according to a certain pattern: if the models are rated according to their cultural context, they range from the general to the particular, i.e., from the non-cultural or *acultural* to the culture-specific.

Moreover, the models are applied according to the chronological sequence of the novels: the acultural models are used to analyse the earlier novels, the culture-oriented models are used with the later novels. This pattern is meant to echo Morrison's search for a culturally distinctive form of narrative. This search is an ongoing endeavour on Morrison's part. In her essay "Rootedness", she describes her preoccupation with that "elusive but identifiable style" that distinguishes black art:

My joy is when I think I have approached it; my misery is when I think I can't get there. (Morrison, 1984, 342)

the model used in this thesis to analyse both novels is purely narratological. Genette's theories are removed from African origins, or indeed, from any specific cultural medium for that matter.

In the second stage, formulaic analysis is used to study the narrative structure of *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. This corresponds to Morrison's intentional use of a Ulysses figure that she believes is adopted by black men. In her interview with Stepto she discusses "the Ulysses theme":

The big scene is the travelling Ulysses scene, for black men. They are moving . . . And, boy, they spread their seed all over the world. They are really moving! Perhaps because they don't have a land, they don't have a dominion. You can trace that historically, and one never knows what would have been the case if we had never been tampered with at all. But that going from town to town or place to place or looking out and over and beyond and changing and so on – that, it seems to me, is one of the monumental themes in black literature about men. That's what they do. It is the Ulysses theme. (Stepto, 378)

Morrison's use of a mythic structure for the two novels brings the technical element closer to the cultural context of the themes dealt

frighten me. The story has a tar baby in it which is used by a white man to catch a rabbit. "Tar baby" is also a name, like nigger, that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. (LeClair, 372)

This allows the alternative structural analysis of the novel drawing on the basic story-line of the fable. In that case, technical representation of the cultural aspect is more in harmony with the thematic structure of *Tar Baby* than with that of *Song of Solomon*.

In the third phase, the models used to analyse *Beloved* and *Jazz* are uniquely African-American. This corresponds to Morrison's own remark that after *Tar Baby* she more easily exploits her own background to weave the proper means of technically representing her themes:

cultural orientation. Thus, *Beloved* serves as an example of the cultural accord of narrative technique and thematic structure.

The cultural element in *Beloved* is drawn from the African-American heritage. In other words, although the model is culturally distinctive, it is temporally distant. In that sense, *Jazz* is doubly unique concerning both technical correspondence to theme in a cultural context *and* the contemporaneity of the cultural element. Thus, the two models used in the structural analysis of *Jazz* are derived from contemporary sources: the improvisational style of the African-American jazz musician, Louis Armstrong, and Morrison's book *Playing in the Dark*. The former model, jazz, is not only one of the most distinguishing features of black culture, it is also the most contemporary. The latter model is equally unique – it associates Morrison's cultural make-up with her personal response to related cultural and literary issues. Moreover, *Playing in the Dark* is expressive of Morrison's most recent socio-literary views, as it is published in the same year as *Jazz*.

Morrison's search for a form that transmits the heartbeat of black culture is fulfilled through her unique exploitation of narrative technique to merge black art forms, such as music and fables, with her

personal background, from childhood neighbourhood to critical views, and weaving all these elements to serve the harmony of the story-line. Morrison's achievement proves that narrative technique is much more than a vehicle that carries a theme, a story or an idea. It is as much an integral part of the novel as any other element. If it is able to represent an entire culture, then it looks at the very heart of fiction.