

Recitatif by Toni Morrison: Literature Review

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INTRODUCTION

Tony Morrison pursued her academic career at Howard. Most of the literary works done by Tony Morrison are based on racial discrimination. *Recitatif* is Tony Morrison's only published literary work of short fiction. The short fiction envisages the conflicting relationship of two friends belonging to two different races (White and Black) living in America. The plot explores the significant theme of racial discrimination/bigotry and its impact on shaping relationships and identities. This essay is based upon the literary analysis and critical review of Morrison's short story *Recitatif* and its underlying themes of racial discrimination through the friendship of Roberta and Twyla.

SUMMARY

The plot unfolds with two little girls Twyla and Roberta in St. Bonny's orphanage. These two girls are the prime focus of the entire story. The girls are very unique from others because they both have mothers, yet they live in an orphan house. They are deprived of the affection and love of their mothers. Roberta and Twyla's mother have personal problems which make them unable to focus on their daughters. This is the reason, Roberta and Twyla do not get importance at the orphanage because they are not actual orphans. Twyla and Roberta have a complicated relationship with their mothers. Twyla mentions her mother Mary teaching her to have biased views of people belonging to Roberta's race. The in charge of the orphanage dismisses Twyla's perspective very rudely. Regardless of their racial differences, these two girls become good friends. There are many similarities exhibited in the young characters of Twyla and Roberta. On several occasions, these young girls get harassed by the older girls at the orphanage.

Apart from these two girls, Maggie is a significant character who works in the kitchen of the orphanage. Maggie is described as an old sandy colored woman, who is a disabled person. Maggie is subjected to multiple harassment because of her disabled identity. Roberta and Twyla's mother visit the orphanage to meet their girls but have a conflicting and unhappy meeting with their daughters. There is an eight-year time gap in the narration. Twyla works on the Thruway at Howard Johnson where she meets Roberta. They both have an uneasy encounter with Roberta during the [Black Civil Rights Movement](#). The narrative further shifts twelve years ahead. Twyla is living with a happy family and has a son named Joseph. Twyla is living a mediocre life.

On the other hand, Roberta is living a rich life by living with her husband and four step-children. They have a warm encounter and decide to have coffee. They argue about Maggie's cast and racial origin during the conversation. Roberta discloses the reason for her rude behaviour at Howard Jonson due to

racial tension going on at that time period. They inquire about each other's mother and leave. The next encounter between Twyla and Roberta happens during a protest where Twyla's car gets attacked by the protesters. Roberta does not help Twyla. The last encounter between Roberta and Twyla happens during Christmas. Roberta opened up her emotional thoughts over Maggie's vulnerable condition and started to cry. Twyla comforts the emotional Roberta and shares her grief. The plot concludes with the reconciliation of Twyla and Roberta. (Morrison and Lessing, *Recitatif*)

LITERATURE REVIEW

The title of the short story *Recitatif* means a "musical declamation" and is featured in many ESL textbooks. This title embeds a significant emphasis on the overall theme of the story. [Tony Morrison](#) uses this title to inspire and encourage all black people to speak up for themselves in a peaceful manner. Morrison is encouraging all black people to contest for their equal rights, democracy, freedom, and sovereignty.

The plot of this short story is quite ambiguous. The tone and the mood of the plot are questioning and bewildering. Twyla and Roberta are the protagonists of the short story. There are a couple of literary devices exhibited in the story. At the beginning of the story, imagery and simile are inculcated by Morrison. The description of Maggie as an "old sandy-coloured disabled woman" (Morrison, 98) explicates the use of imagery to exhibit racial labelling and bigotry in society. Twyla compares herself with Roberta with the example of "like salt and pepper" (Morrison, 160). Morrison emphasizes the complementing relationship between Twyla and Roberta. However, this comparison can also suggest the difference of identity between Twyla and Roberta based on their race and skin colour. Twyla and Roberta are pretty much alike apart from their skin colour (race). The relationship between Twyla and Roberta exhibits powerful juxtaposition. Twyla is an unreliable narrator because she is a white woman talking about black people. The ambiguous plot and lack of objective explanation make the narrator unreliable. Twyla is a young girl with limited knowledge and cognitive capacity. She did not get her parental nurturing and lacked proper grooming. The mother of Twyla has left her in an orphanage (Stanley). She is indifferent to the political and racial difference and therefore does not provide an objective explanation of racial injustices inflicted upon black people. Hence, she is an unreliable narrator (Rayson).

Twyla Benson and Roberta are the two main characters of this short story. Twyla Benson is the narrator and the protagonist of the story. She is deprived of her family's love. Her mother cannot take care of her. Therefore, she lives in an orphanage. Twyla's traumatic childhood has an immense impact on her adult life. She marries a mediocre family and lives as an ordinary housewife. She does not exhibit any prejudgments for disabled people or the black race. She has a neutral point of view. Roberta Fisk is a childhood friend of Twyla. Roberta's mother has also abandoned her at the orphanage. Despite living the same childhood life, Robert is different from Twyla in her adulthood. Roberta is a dynamic character in the story. She is class-conscious and race-conscious. She never forgets about the vulnerable condition. Maggie is a disabled black woman who works in the kitchen of

the orphanage. She is always bullied by other girls. She is a laughingstock of many girls at the orphanage. She is a flat character who quietly tolerates all the suffering inflicted by others.

The issue of identity and discrimination is the cardinal theme of this story. Throughout the plot, Twyla and Roberta's friendship has an undefined segregation/ space between them. Roberta and Twyla have five encounters throughout the plot which shape the racial differences of their friendship. This racial gap between these two girls seems to be uncrossable. Racial discrimination is not only between these girls but on a national level also. In the background of the story, racial tension is vivid through the busing crisis(Morris). The context of the Black People's Civil Rights Movement is also foreshadowed in the story during Roberta and Twyla's first encounter after leaving the orphanage. The impact of racial identity and racial bigotry on relationships is vivid in Morrison's short story(Morrison and Lessing, *Recitatif*). The bumpy relationship of two women of different racial origins from childhood to adulthood reflects the racial bigotry of the society portrayed in the story. Through the perspective of Robert and Twyla, one can envisage the racial tensions and identities drawn by the society(Knoflíčková). The racial division is further amplified by the economic and political differences of both sides. Twyla and Roberta's differences envisage their racial, economic, and political differences. Twyla is living a low mediocre life. However, Roberta is living a rich and wealthy life. At the end of the plot, Roberta and Twyla share a common feeling of sorrow for Maggie despite their racial differences.

The main theme of racial discrimination shapes the identities of people and their perceptions. The description of Maggie exhibits the impact of racial discrimination on identities. Maggie was ill-treated because she was a black disabled woman. The scenario would have been different if she was not black. Twyla and Roberta's relationship signifies racial differences. The argument of Twyla and Roberta over Maggie being a black woman or not shows the racial impact on shaping individual identities by the social stigmas.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis entails the notion of racial discrimination and bigotry through the friendship of Twyla and Roberta. Morrison uses an ambiguous plot to show the racial impact on shaping the identities and relationships of Roberta and Twyla. Morrison deliberately uses ambiguous details of the racial identity of Roberta and Twyla. Morrison provides a broad platform for the readers to contemplate and make racial preconceptions of the characters involved in the story. [Tony Morrison](#) has provided ample physical, social, and historical description and context to incite the contemplation of readers to formulate their racial presumptions. In a nutshell, *Recitatif* expressively challenges the presumptions of readers of race and identity by leaving the racial identity of Roberta and Twyla vague. The critical analysis of this short story reflects the unconscious stereotypes which are embedded in our cognitive facilities.

Works Cited

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