

SELF-RELIANCE AND THE RELEASE FROM SPELLS: SIX AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE WORK OF TONI MORRISON

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Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-) is the first African-American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature.¹⁾ The Civil Rights Movement, which began in the 1950s, has become a great wave. It has streamed from the South to all the rest of the country and has continued in the form of feminism. Both the Civil Rights Movement and feminism have sought the abolition of discrimination in order to seek the freedom for minorities and women to live as human beings. This progress has not been smooth, and has not been without trouble for African-American women.

Long after the abolition of slavery, African-American women continued to suffer discrimination in both racial and sexual forms. Beginning in 1960s, an increasing number of works dealing with such kinds of discrimination and written by African-American women were published and read by the general public. Toni Morrison, whose first work was published in 1970, stated, “Unspeakable. Unspoken, but now I speak.”, and from that time onward her artistic energy, driven by the demons of discrimination, has continued to gain momentum and power.

This thesis examines six African-American women in Morrison's works who are bound by “spells” and manage to be released from their spells. The thesis considers the meaning of these characters' efforts to bring up children while working, their relations with their children, and their struggles against discrimination. The thesis analyzes in detail each of these six women's lives as laborers, mothers and wives in order to identify their distinctive efforts to liberate themselves from their respective spells and become independent.

Three major characteristics can be found in Morrison's works. First, the stories often deal with African-American women who appear to have suffered no discrimination at all, but who, in reality, still face significant discrimination, both racial and sexual. Morrison describes her works in *Playing in the Dark*, “My work requires me to think about how free

1) This thesis summarizes my doctoral dissertation at Kinjo University in 2006.

I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society” (Morrison 4). Morrison recognizes that a life free of these kinds of discrimination is the proper goal of her African-American women characters.

Second, all of Morrison’s works involve what might be called “antagonism between mother and daughter”. This tension tends to be more serious than what is ordinarily found in mother-and-daughter relations. In Morrison’s novels, sometimes the two rivals try to injure each other so badly that they cannot salvage their relationship. This antagonism seems to derive from the fact that many African-American families often lack a father and consist of a mother and children.

Third, in Morrison’s works, there exists a rich traditional oral culture which had been cultivated in slavery for generations. Native colloquial expressions including discriminatory ones are quite abundant in these works, showing clearly that Morrison is proud to be an African-American. As slaves were not allowed to read or write, they had to pass down their lullabies and folklore orally, from mothers to children to grandchildren. Morrison made it her mission to preserve this tradition in the written word and offer it to the world.

Morrison’s major works include *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992). For her body of work, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, the first African-American woman to be so honored. Among her principal characters are Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*, Sethe in *Beloved*, Eva in *Sula*, Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Ondine in *Tar Baby*, and Violet in *Jazz*. These six African-American women are the primary subject of this thesis, and all of them struggle valiantly against discrimination. Morrison does not openly demand that discrimination should be ended instantly. Rather, she appeals to the best impulses in society by showing in her works the effects of discrimination and the various counter-measures to oppose them, vividly depicting the lives of African-American women struggling against injustice.

Each of these six women has endured discrimination and poverty as a consequence of being born African-American. Regardless of her own personal interests, each one is destined to work to earn her family’s daily bread. Even after marrying and having children,²⁾ all six women must continue to work, for their husbands are unable to support their families or simply disappear. Though the six women are willing to work, they are generally denied decent employment because of the double discrimination of race and sex. The centuries-long and bitter heritage of discrimination and poverty from the time of slavery eventually drives Sethe to commit infanticide (in *Beloved*) and Cholly to rape his daughter (in *The Bluest Eye*), as if these are their inescapable destinies. Are the fates of African-American women predetermined and impossible to change? Morrison would seem to disagree, allowing her characters to encounter not only agony and sorrow, but also joy and

2) In all six women, only Ondine and Violet are childless.

hope.

All six subjects of this thesis are African-Americans and their jobs, background, and family make up are quite difficult. Historically, the oldest story is that of Sethe, who was a slave, and the other five subjects' ancestors were also slaves. The root of their spell is slavery.

As Doreen Fowler explains about slave women, including Sethe,

Slavery, as Morrison realizes it in *Beloved* institutionalizes the repression of mother power. The plantation system of the old South deified the power of the master at the expense of the power of the other. Every man, woman, and child on the plantation was ruled by the master, but the slave woman had no rights, nothing: neither her body nor her children were her own. The children she made out of her body belonged to the master to use as he chose. (Fowler 141)

Slavery completely denied the mother. Slave mothers were full of lamentation and grief, because they could not suckle their babies and bring them up. Though they were given double roles, as a labor force and a machine for bearing babies, women slaves were in the lowest position in the farm. African-American slaves, especially women slaves, were exploited by plantation owners as they liked. Therefore the women slaves, whether they wanted or not, bore babies and became mothers.

How could they put up with their extremely low position? In *Beloved*, the fact that Sethe and Baby Suggs are denied their role as mothers is shown by their bodily injury and unforgettable longing for their children. Still, Sethe can tell of her joy to hold her children in her arms and Baby Suggs can take pride in her son. Even after the emancipation of slaves after the Civil War, the situation of race and sex discrimination still continued. As Eva's husband disappears and Pauline's husband would not work, Eva and Pauline have to work very hard as the head of their family.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 examines Pauline, employed as a maid, and Sethe, who is an ex-slave. Chapter 2 examines Eva, who is the owner of rental property, and Pilate, who is a maker and seller of liquor. Finally, Chapter 3 examines Ondine, employed as a maid, and Violet, who works as a beautician. The most important consideration in this thesis is the trauma caused by discrimination. Like Morrison herself,³⁾ the African-American women examined in this thesis have endured racial and sexual discrimination, poverty and the collapse of homes, as if an evil spell were on them.

In the three chapters of this thesis, the spiritual journeys of six African-American women are traced as they seek release from their respective spells and attain independence.

3) Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio. She was greatly influenced by her parents and her hometown. After a divorce, she brought up two sons, and has been an editor of magazine, instructor, and active writer.

Chapter 1 Pauline and Sethe

This chapter examines two contrasting characters, Pauline and Sethe. Pauline, in *The Bluest Eye*, is a working mother, employed as a maid for a white family. Her own family consists of herself, her husband, a son, and a daughter. Her “spell” is an obsession with her family members being poor and unattractive. Later, Pauline is released from her spell by working as a faithful maid. However, in devoting herself to her work at the expense of caring adequately for her own family, she fails to find complete happiness even after being released from her spell.

By contrast, Sethe, in *Beloved*, is a loving mother.⁴⁾ An ex-slave and a cook in a restaurant, she supports a family consisting of herself, her mother-in-law, two sons, and two daughters. Her “spell” is brought on by her crime of infanticide. She commits this act, breaking the primal taboo, because she can not endure watching her daughter, Beloved, become a slave. Sethe is haunted by her guilt over this crime and her memories of her lost daughter for the next eighteen years.

When a girl who says she is Beloved comes to her house, Sethe devotes herself to her so much that she loses her job and falls ill. Then her friend, Paul D, tells her, “You your best thing, Sethe.” (*B*⁵⁾ 335) and with these words Sethe is released from her spell. Afterwards, Sethe’s happiness depends on how she chooses live the rest of her life. The appearance of the girl who says she is Beloved brings severe hardships and joys to Sethe and Denver. Sethe is fired from her job, but enjoys the life of a mother and daughters with Beloved, whom she killed.

Wendy Harding and Martin Jacky describe this relationships as follows,

In her specular function, Beloved exteriorizes the plight of all the other characters associated with 124, and in her remorseless indifference she contributes to resolve their most indurated existential blocks. Besides helping Sethe to explore the ambivalence of her criminal act, she causes Denver to surmount the regressive solitude in which she had secluded herself after her brothers' flight, and as a consequence of her mother's terrifying love. Beloved's alternance of seduction and indifference in response to the young girl's possessiveness finally convinces Denver to leave the enchanted circle of 124 and rejoin the rest of the community. (Harding and Martin 52)

While Sethe suffers from past guilt and loses her mind, Beloved, her eldest daughter, acts as she pleases. So Denver, her second daughter, who has been supported by Sethe, has to shoulder the burden for the family. Denver is not defeated by these difficulties. Rather, she is challenged by them, for she is a strong and bright African-American woman. She has lived for 18 years with her mother and nobody comes to their house. Since Denver never forgets that she was born during escape and brought up by her mother without her

4) Barbara H. Solomon writes, “Sethe has gloried in her determination, strength, and resilience as attributes of a mother who needs these characteristics to enable her children to survive, ...” (Solomon 27).

5) Abbreviations are used for the titles of Morrison's novels as follows: *BE*-*The Bluest Eye*, *S*-*Sula*, *SS*-*Song of Solomon*, *T*-*Tar Baby*, *B*-*Beloved*, and *J*-*Jazz*.

father, a brilliant light comes into their lives. Paul D is surprised by Denver's development. She now grows up to womanhood, seeking a job of her own and trying to realize her future hope. From her grandmother to Sethe, Sethe to Denver, despair to desire, the weight of the mother's life released from its spell is inherited by her daughter.

The lives of Pauline and Sethe are completely opposite. They have a common will to overcome the curse of being African-American women, but take opposite paths in family relationships and work. Namely, Pauline keeps her job but neglects her family, while Sethe quits her job to spend time with her daughter. Pauline's disabled foot, caused by an injury in infancy and Sethe's back injury from being beaten with a whip, do not hinder their daily lives, but constitute severe trauma in their mind.

The friend of Pecola (Pauline's daughter) says about Pauline. "... 'When you're in the house with me, even Mrs. Breedlove doesn't say anything to you. Ever. Sometimes I wonder if she even sees you.' / 'Why wouldn't she see me?' / 'I don't know. She almost walks right over you.' / 'Maybe she doesn't feel too good since Cholly's gone.'..." (BE 153).

When Sethe can not do anything after the young girl (the young girl says "I am Beloved") goes away, Sethe says to her friend, Paul D. "... 'Paul D?' / 'What, baby?' / 'She left me.' / 'Aw, girl. Don't cry.' / 'She was my best thing.' ... / 'me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.'... / 'You your best thing, Sethe. You are.' / His holding fingers are holding hers. / 'Me? Me?' ..." (B 335).

Though Pauline lives with her daughter, she ignores her daughter as if she is invisible and does not speak with her. Pauline only worries about her husband, but will not think about her young daughter's hardship, that she has had a stillbirth, and only works very hard. Undoubtedly, her work is important, but she is too selfish. In contrast, Sethe thinks the young girl who says she is Beloved is her most precious thing and still cries over her leaving. Yet she comes to realize her selfhood and Paul D teaches her about her own value. It is as the best model for her children that Sethe values herself and lives vibrantly.

Paul E. Zopf, Jr. comments about a family in which women hold power,

... there is a great variety of family forms, and the one which has grown most rapidly in the past two decades is the female-headed family with no husband present — a family type which provokes many questions. Some of them deal with how well socialization is carried out; whether its content creates alienation and negative perceptions of education, work, self, and society; and how badly various racial and ethnic groups suffer from poverty. (Zopf 178)

The first aspect of the female-headed family which provokes many questions is that the mothers can not earn much money. The second is people's prejudice against them. These two causes do not arise from their individual responsibility but social discrimination. If they have strong will to live as human being, a solution can be found for these negative factors.

The husband and daughter whom Pauline can not love and the daughter whom Sethe loves too deeply are the roots of their spells. Though the common causes come from their

poverty and the discrimination against African-American women, they are too pure and obedient to fight it directly. Nevertheless, they need to live to aim for a better life. A better life for them is to have fulfilling work, to live with the family's love, and to keep a relationship with society. After being released from her spell, Pauline works with self-reliance, and should have good relationships with Pecola. In the same way, Sethe recovers her mind and body, finds work, and makes friends with Paul D and Denver. Thus, their independence is something achieved by themselves.

Chapter 2 Eva and Pilate

This chapter examines two other women, Eva and Pilate, who have also been chosen for their contrasting natures. Eva, in *Sula*, is a strong mother. She is the owner of rental property, and her family consists of herself, two daughters, and a son. Her spell is hopeless poverty and a strong hatred for her ex-husband. She is partially released from the spell when she receives a large sum of money as compensation for the loss of one of her legs. With the money, she builds a house big enough to allow her to shelter her family⁶⁾ and generate income by renting out the remaining rooms. From her position as a landowner and landlady, she dominates her family and her renters. She kills her son because he fails to meet her expectations of what she considers a righteous man. By the novel's end, she still carries her hatred for her ex-husband, even though by then she is over ninety years old.

Pilate, in *Song of Solomon*, is a free mother.⁷⁾ She is a maker and seller of liquor, and her family consists simply of herself, a daughter, and a granddaughter. Pilate's spell is, curiously, the loss of a navel at birth. Pilate is released from her spell after she becomes a mother and develops feelings of compassion for the troubled. She lives as a free individualist until, tragically and paradoxically, she is shot dead in place of her loving nephew.

The lives of these women are very much alike, namely, that the more they run into trouble, the more powerful they become. Eva's husband disappeared when their children were infants and Pilate was an unmarried mother. Therefore they are destined to work very hard for their living. Both of their jobs, renting out the remaining rooms and making and selling liquor, have something in common in that they can be done with leisure, independence, and while caring for children. Moreover they have strong and independent personalities, and they can do their jobs well.

As they make their living not outside but in their homes, they have much influence over their families, and the essence of their lives is in their houses. Eva's great house, which has many rooms, is described as follows:

... she preferred Sula's woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts

6) Her children are depicted as follows in *Sula*, "Under Eva's distant eye, and prey to her idiosyncrasies, her own children grew up stealthily: ..." (S 58).

7) Patrick B. Bjork writes, "She presents herself to the boys as she appears in the beginning of the novel with the presence of strength, confidence, and good humor" (Bjork 90).

of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (S 44)

In contrast, Pilate's narrow, flat house is described as follows:

She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road. (SS 27)

Eva and Pilate represent African American women who carve out their own way to fight discrimination and prejudice, and also love the children they bear. Barbara Christian comments on the African-American mothers whom Morrison describes, "One of the major themes of your work would be the complexities of motherhood, the liberation and restrictions of that role for African-American women: how thick that mother's love was, yet how complex, how beautiful, even monumental that role could be" (Christian 23). To think about African-American mothers' history, the more difficult the position they are placed under, the stronger their love and expectations for their children become. They are spirited and powerful at first sight and support their family as the head of a matriarchal structure. Above all, they always think of their children first.

Eva is released from the spell of poverty and hatred for her husband. Pilate is also released from the spell of being shut off from her acquaintance by being born disabled. They give deep affection to their children, and also need to plan their own life base. Eva burns to death her loving son, who strays from the right way. Pilate loves not only her daughter and granddaughter but also her nephew whose father hates her very much. Under severe racial prejudice and discrimination, for African American women during those times, their efforts to overcome their spells and to progress independently are extraordinary.

Chapter 3 Ondine and Violet

This chapter examines a third pair of characters, Ondine and Violet. Ondine, in *Tar Baby*, is a faithful servant. She works as a maid for a white couple, and her family consists only of herself and her husband. Her spell is the discord that she experiences with her mistress and her husband's niece. She works together with her husband for thirty years to support the niece. She is released from the spell through serious discussions with both her mistress and her niece about her true feelings and theirs. By the end, she helps her husband, her master, and her mistress, and all live together in relative harmony.

Finally, Violet, in *Jazz*, is a technician who works as a beautician. Like Ondine, Violet has a family consisting only of herself and her husband. Her spell is brought on by her miscarried pregnancies and her troubled relationship with her husband. Only after her husband shoots his lover dead does Violet try to win back her husband's love. When she succeeds, she is released from her spell. Her husband finds a new job,⁸⁾ she works as a

beautician, and a comfortable life together opens up for them.

The women are married women but have no children. Though they hoped to have children, they can not become mothers. This turns out to be their spell. Ondine loves her husband's niece, Jadine as her own daughter. "... Such a smart little girl, and so pretty, I never minded not having children after we started taking care of her. ..." (T 193). Therefore, all of her salary is used to pay Jadine's school expenses, and she secretly expects to be reciprocated. After divining Jadine's real intentions, Ondine decides not to depend on her, and responds to her husband's question as follows, "... 'you think she'll bury us, Ondine.' / 'I think we're going to have to bury ourselves, Sydney.'..." (T 284). Though they are not sure African- Americans and white people can understand each other, Ondine and Sydney choose to live with their master and mistress. Sydney tells his master with a tender heart. "... We'll give you the best of care. Just like we always done. That's something you ain't never got to worry about. ..." (T 287).

In contrast, Violet works very hard for herself.⁹⁾ "She collected customers by going up to them and describing her services ('I can do your hair better and cheaper, and do it when and where you want')" (J 23). Once Violet turns 50, she only works to get her living expenses. After Violet's husband shot his lover, she makes her own efforts to love her husband once more. As a result, they are born again, as they truly need each other, are released from their spells, and live spiritually free lives.

Neither Ondine nor Violet can become mothers, but experience quite different lives. Fortunately they are released from their spells, and establish firm relationships with their husbands. Karen E. Fields describes familiar love as follows,

We habitually think of love as an inhabitant of the familiar human relations that at once construct and constrict it. It seems to lean and grow upon human relationships known to us, much as ivy leans and grows upon a familiar wall. But love can also be thought of as a part of nature that exists in and for itself, as a free-growing plant that enters the world of human beings on its own. (Fields 161)

Such familiar love exists among couples, parents and children, and neighbors, and it can be fostered in human relationships which take many years to be established. If people live alone, who can love or can be loved? Having an object to love, love puts itself forth and grows. Although love is sometimes denied and betrayed, human beings continue to love. Love can be revitalized through various hardships and continues forever. Ondine and Violet's love for their family resembles ivy and wall; they truly need their family. They hold the love in their hearts and reconcile home and work.

8) Joe is described in *Jazz* as follows, "Joe found work at Paydirt, a speakeasy night job that lets him see the City do its unbelievable sky and run around with Violet in afternoon daylight" (J 223).

9) Since Violet works too hard, she experiences miscarriages three times.

Conclusion

This thesis explores how these six African-American women created by Morrison make an effort to win their release from spells, and their independence, and how they sustain their joys or hopes as wives or mothers. Family, generally, is composed of a husband, wife, and children, and this thesis focuses especially on wives, mothers, and daughters in these six works. The essence of human lives is to work and live off earnings. Our protagonists are not career women, but instead endure hard work to make a living and support their children. Women, not only wives but also single mothers, do not live freely, but work desperately to conquer poverty. In addition, when they support their children, they must fight discrimination, and various prejudices and troubles. For example, two of them kill their own children. Yet, their ways of living demonstrate their efforts as human beings.

Almost unavoidably, if a mother works outside the home, each family member will be affected, often negatively. Children will usually suffer the most. One of the unique characteristics of African-American society is that a family unit may often include people who are not related in blood, but who still live together as if they were members of the family. In Morrison's works, there are many African-American women, from infants to the elderly, from slavery to the present. The six women characters examined in the present study have certain common qualities: each is a mother or hopes to be one, and each has suffered a deep personal injury in body or mind. Not surprisingly, Morrison, who is herself a divorced mother, shows particular sympathy for women in similarly difficult circumstances.

Morrison's six works condemn the discrimination against African-American women after the emancipation of slaves. These works also express the plight of working women.

Concerning the economic history of African-American women, Betty Woody writes,

To date, only limited attention has been given in labor theory to the role of black women in the paid economy. The absence of historical data handicaps analysis and documentation of the changing position of black women in the workplace. ... Such limited views of black women, however, ignore evidence of the historical role of black women as wage earners and significant contributors to the economic well-being of black families. (Woody 25)

In historical analysis and documentation, African-American women do not appear as contributors to the economic well-being of black families. Yet, in fact, African-American women, as shown in this thesis worked and supported their families for a long time.

With deep affection for her characters, Morrison portrays these six African-American women struggling with their life choices, supporting their own children, and makes us understand how their lives have been fought out. Refusing to accept the miserable conditions which life has cast them, these six women achieve release, independence, and even transcendence. Without depending on men, they use the strength of their own will to find jobs and raise their children. In doing so, they attain integrity and dignity.

Having their hard-won skills and wisdom, these six women become sufficient models for the next generation of African-American women. After the Civil Rights Movement and

feminism, times have surely changed, and so has their situation, but in reality, racial and sexual discrimination has not been eliminated yet. Morrison, therefore, traces their background from the day of slavery to the present, and her radical thought is expressed through the representative lives of these six African-American women. Furthermore, she entrusts their dreams to their children.

Morrison's interests are aesthetic, psychological, and historical. Peter Widdowson writes, "There are a number of 'enlightening' narrative strategies employed in Morrison's own novel [s] to get the several receding histories written, ..." (Widdowson 198). Readers may wish to forget the legacy of discrimination that has survived from the era of slavery and which is the "receding histories" mentioned above. But the persistence of discrimination, both racial and sexual, is a fact which cannot be forgotten and which Morrison urges her readers to acknowledge, even as it continues into contemporary times. Literature should not be limited to the varied forms of art; it must also tell the truth about human nature and society.

All six of these African-American women find degrees of release from their spells. The character trait of these women that is most decisive in the process of releasing themselves from their long-standing spells and becoming independent is the strong will which the six women inherited from their ancestors and which they foster in themselves. A sad exception is Sethe, who, on her own, cannot overcome her miserable memories of infanticide and cannot release herself from her spell; mercifully, a friend guides her to release.

Morrison sheds light on the experience of African-American women who endured slavery and upheld matriarchy, but who remained in the obscure corners of U.S. history. In Morrison's works, the principal characters show their indomitable will to work and their overwhelming love for their own children. The strength of these African-American women derives from their heritage of love and duty to support their families. An unbroken determination to work and abundant affection are passed on from mothers to daughters, to granddaughters, and finally to African-American women in the present, certainly including Toni Morrison herself. The present generation is veritably leaping with this hard-earned freedom. Generally, the stronger the spell, the brighter the life after the release from it. Yet until the day when race and sexual discrimination are truly abolished, it is to be hoped that Toni Morrison will continue to write.

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