

Re-reading Toni Morrison: A Reader-response Approach

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ABSTRACT: Toni Morrison, one of the most well-known American writers of the literary world, has been both appreciated and criticized from various viewpoints as most writers are. Her works are triumphs of language and imagination, and are considered mastered classics of modernism. Furthermore, her works are studied for their depiction of sensitive issues such as racism, slavery, sexuality, human drives, relationships, and mental trauma. However, fewer studies have analyzed her text from a reader-response perspective. Hence, this paper evaluates the plots, scenes, and themes of her texts using a reader-response approach. I will analyze three texts by Morrison using different arguments made by Iser. Further, I will study the dynamics of interpretation considering the aspects of race, class, and sex. Lastly, I will move toward the conclusion discussing Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities.

Keywords: Reader-response, Interaction between reader and text, Critical theory.

I INTRODUCTION

Reader-response criticism is defined as a school of literary theory that considers the reader a medium through which a text achieves actual existence and gains complete meaning through the reader's interpretation. In general, under this theory, critics claim that for understanding a text, one must consider the processes that readers use to create their own meaning and experience. One of such critics is Wolfgang Iser (1926-2007), who, in his essay *Interaction Between Text and Reader*, talks about such areas of a plot wherein the reader can get confused and hence, can fill them up with his/her interpretations. He calls these areas gaps or blanks.

My choice of a reader-response approach to study Toni Morrison's texts is a result of reading Iser's theory and ideas. Hence, his essay *Interaction Between Text and Reader* would be the base for my study to highlight the empty spaces and blanks in Morrison's *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*.

Analysis

In the use of epic themes for her works, Morrison does not identify her works as feminist, although most of them typically concentrate on black women. She has stated that "it's off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of a feminist tract. I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things." [1] Simultaneously, emotional, close, strong, and unconditional bonds exist between Morrison's female characters, but again, lesbianism does not seem to be exposed by her

because every single character is heterosexual, as Barbara Smith rightly says in her critical essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism." She writes, "In both the works, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, relationships between girls and women are essential, yet, at the same time physical sexuality is overtly expressed only between men and women. (...) Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives." [2]

On this basis, we can recognize the uncertainty of Morrison's intention in constructing her stories. On the one hand is Morrison's denial. On the other hand are her women characters: bold and central. Such a situation matches up to the idea of the two poles of a literary work proposed by Iser in the essay, which "we might call the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader." [3] This applies both to the ending and the beginning of a text because a reader develops not only a certain image of the text before reading it but also a highly dissimilar view after reading it. Therefore, we can say that the title *Beloved* is to a large extent a marker of a love story; however, after reading it, one realizes its actual meaning. Furthermore, as a reader, when it came to my knowledge that the story is based on a real-life story of a lady called Margaret Garner, my interpretation of the text as a purely fictional work changed. Along these lines, in consideration of Morrison's *Sula*, it can be argued that *Sula* means peace literally, but Morrison's *Sula* has a very messy, aggressive, and disturbed life. And thus, the

name Sula depicts complete opposition of the characteristics of Sula.

Distinguishing reading on a comparative basis from other forms of social interaction, it is apparent that “there is no face to face situation in reading. A text cannot adapt itself to each reader it comes in contact with... the reader can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it.” [4] This indicates that if I as a reader have a question about who impregnates Beloved in the end of the novel, I probably have no source to get the exact answer. The incident is highly indeterministic and is left open for diverse interpretations. Further, there is no answer justifying to the reader Hannah’s disliking for her daughter Sula in the novel as she says, “I love Sula but I don’t like her.” [5] In addition, similar to Beloved’s pregnancy is the act of Pecola’s father raping her twice in *The Bluest Eye*. There is no strong reason that justifies the incident. Hence, it is a transparent fact that the text does not talk back to correct the reader’s misinterpretations. And there is no “tertium comparationis” in the act of reading.

Now, while passing through these fragments in a plot, says Iser, “the segment on which the viewpoint focuses in each particular moment becomes the theme. The theme of one moment becomes the background against which the next segment takes on its actuality, and so on.” [6] Therefore, if a reader reads up to Chicken Little’s death in *Sula*, the theme assumed will be friendship and attraction or attachment between opposites. However, when the reader will move further, the theme will get altered. Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* portrays racism till one point, but on a complete reading, one finds desire and dissatisfaction to be at the center as themes. In addition, sometimes there is also an interplay between different themes if they get switched alternately across the plot. For example, in *Beloved*, slavery seems to be a central issue, but its consequences depicted in the form of mental trauma and imbalance are also a major part of the plot’s background.

Interpretation in the context of race, class, and sex

Focusing some light on the following statement: “I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience,” [7] as a fact, it is clear that two people will evaluate the gaps in a plot differently. If the two people belong to different sexes, races, and classes, the dissimilarities between their interpretations will be huge. For example, if I feel that Sula’s way of living is inappropriate, a male reader might perceive the same to be interesting and fun. It may also happen that a female reader from a different

class or one who has experienced the same life will contrast my views. Therefore, class and sex become important aspects to be considered responsible for the reader’s interpretation.

In context of race, there would be significant opposition in locating incidents within the plot between me, a black man or woman, and a white man or woman, as readers. However, being unknown of their ideologies, arguments, and experiences, no decisions can be made about their positions as readers because all the three novels portray blacks and the dispute between Americans and African-Americans is vast, deep, and controversial.

Further, this connects to Stanley Fish’s interpretive communities in his essay *Interpreting the Variorum*. Fish says that “interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.” [8] Therefore, people from the same community, race, or class might read and interpret a text due to interpretive strategies that writers use from that community. Certainly, as per Fish, these communities are always temporary and as individuals move from one community to another, interpretive communities grow and decline. Hence, these communities can be called culture- and education-specific as these two areas influence thought processes heavily.

II. CONCLUSION

Moving toward a conclusion, I say that reading is thus an active process of becoming conscious of otherness as it brings about a questioning and probing of the validity of received norms and systems. The attractiveness of Iser’s theory apparently lies in his attempt to accommodate as broad a spectrum of theoretical speculation as possible, and to integrate it all within a total theory of reading: author, text, reader, the world, the process of reception, the phenomenology of perception and reading, and the dynamic nature of comprehension, integrating the one model of aesthetic response.

Taking a different approach toward Morrison’s novels has let me analyze them from a less explored perspective. Moreover, the issues of race, sex, and class have acquired place in the new approach, blending with the central view of a reader and a reader’s response.

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