



The Narrative and Literary Attributes of Themes and Symbols: Towards Exploring New Meanings and Auctorial Insights in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

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ABSTRACT

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This study attempts to explore the function of themes and symbols in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif." It concentrates on the role of themes and symbols and representing the significance of the narrative events. Therefore, the analysis accentuates the life of the protagonist, Twyla, who suffers from tensional and discrepant living conditions. The interpretation of the protagonist and events will depend on three interrelated literary elements, namely, the protagonist, the narrative events, and the spatial setting. First, the protagonist will be discussed in relation to her social and psychological barriers. Second, the narrative events will be tackled in the light of Morrison's fictional descriptions of these barriers. Third, the spatial setting will be analyzed through tracing the orphanage where Twyla spends time with another girl, Roberta. In this sense, the study's methodology follows a textual and qualitative analysis of these elements with special emphasis on themes and symbols that reveal their genuine meanings.

Keywords: Morrison, Narrative, Recitatif, Symbol, Theme.

السمات السردية والأدبية للمواضيع والرموز: نحو استكشاف معانٍ جديدة وروى تأليفية في قصة توني موريسون 'ريسيتانف'

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الملخص:

تحاول هذه الدراسة استكشاف وظيفة التيمات والرموز في قصة توني موريسون «ريسيتانف»، مركزةً على دورها في تمثيل دلالات الأحداث السردية. وعليه، تسلط الدراسة الضوء على حياة البطلة تويلا، التي تعاني من ظروف معيشية متوترة ومتعارضة. سيعتمد تفسير شخصية البطلة والأحداث على ثلاثة عناصر أدبية مترابطة، وهي: الشخصية الرئيسية، والأحداث السردية، والحيز المكاني. أولاً، سيتم تناول البطلة من حيث عوائقها الاجتماعية والنفسية. ثانياً، ستناقش الأحداث السردية في ضوء الأوصاف التخيلية التي قدّمتها موريسون لتلك العوائق. ثالثاً، سيحلّل الحيز المكاني من خلال تتبع دار الأيتام التي قضت فيها تويلا وقتها مع فتاة أخرى تُدعى روبرتا. وبهذا المعنى، تتبع منهجية الدراسة تحليلاً نصياً وكيفياً لهذه العناصر مع تركيز خاص على التيمات والرموز التي تكشف عن معانيها الأصلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: موريسون، السرد، التلاوة، الرمز، الموضوع.

1. Introduction

The study of literary symbols is highly important in interpreting the implicit meanings of literary works. Symbols signify the authorial implied messages projected in the course of literary plots due to the style used to express these symbols in certain ways. Symbols hold crucial significance to the exploration of profound meanings embedded in the course of the fictional layers of narrative works (Hermans, 2014). Literary scholars highlight the uses of symbols that have exceptional nuances which have been a subject to different literary and critical interpretation which paved the way for grasping the



narrative text from different perpectives. Being so, the literary works include many symbolical insights about the reality of society and life outside the literary work at the expense of the technical components (Kirsznar and Mandell, 2013). For this reason, the symbolic attributes of narrative texts render them a distinctive place among the grand narratives since they are complexly concerned with the possibility of rectifying social problems through fiction. Hence, the fictional aspects of the symbols are important for delving deep into the function of implied meanings inferred by the receptive readers.

Symbols are the core path to the indirect meanings and images employed by authors to offer the receptive readers with vivid narrative descriptions created by the authorial view of life and reality. The fictional events, therefore, are the pithy channels used for expressing specific meanings that help the reader in figuring out the target insights of fictional plots. Being so, the interpretation of literary symbols depends on the authorial dexterity in using some expressions and words needed for the profound implications of the whole works (Garry and El-Shamy, 2005). In this way, diction plays a crucial role in explain indications of literary symbols for the sake of coming onto common grounds between the author's implied message and the reader's perception of the work. This study attempts to explore the thematic aspects of symbols in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif." Consequently, the discussion of symbols results in paving the way for better understanding of the story and how it serves in handling complex meanings through literary expressions. Therefore, the discussion will focus mainly on the duality of themes and symbols used by Morrison to describe the social and personal conditions of the eponymous protagonist.

2. Literature Review

Morrison's "Recitatif" has been studied from various critical approaches. Abdalhadi Nimer Abu Jweid et al. (2015) argue that the story is a depiction of pre-colonial era where African-American people had experienced drastic cultural due changes due to postcolonial domination. They (2015) contend that Morrison deals with this change in the light of the filiation and affiliation relationship between the African people and their American counterparts. The study applies the concepts of nativism, diaspora, and chromatism for the sake of exploring the affinity between the cultural norms before and after colonialism (p.15). Such affinity is restricted by the traditional encounters between the colonized African people and how they are culturally perceived by their American masters. The study offers cogent textual clues about pre-colonial cultural residuals that are affected by the postcolonial cultural hegemony. Yet, it does not provide ample



examples about the story symbolic significance which will be accentuated in the current study.

Jaya Singh (2021) applies the concept of identity to discover the racial origins of the African people. She (2021) tries to unravel the role of marginalization and silence in the story. In other words, marginalization and silence suppress the African voices that call for maintaining their original identity, but they are hindered by the American social mainstream that opposes and reneges any form of social reconciliation between the two ethnicities (p.339). Singh (2021) follows a textual analysis of ethnic identity, and the study cites convincing examples from the story about identity and racial ethnicity. However, the thematic attributes of identity and ethnicity are not completely accentuated. In this study, therefore, the emphasis will be on the thematic peculiarities of the characters and how they serve as symbols literary miniatures about life and society which is rarely tackled in the previous study.

Rezaul Ahsan (2021) approaches the story from a psychoanalytic perspective. He (2021) applies the concept of trauma to delve deep onto the causes of trauma and how it could be healed. The study pinpoints the latent impetus of trauma which manifests in the accumulation of negative experiences that are inhibited and repressed in the protagonist's unconscious mind. These experiences, consequently, are sustained by the protagonist's memory that is affected by the tragic life in the past. Being so, they motivate the protagonist's unconscious mind that is moved by any events or incidents that triggers past experiences (p.230). Ahsan (2021) concludes that the past events are the true and authentic causes of trauma, and they could be healed by forgetting the past experiences. The study discusses the concept of trauma and it connects it with the protagonist's memory in an appropriate way. Nevertheless, it partially deals with the thematic attributes of trauma. Therefore, these thematic aspects will be further developed together with symbolism in this study.

3. Discussion

Morrison's "Recitatif" is an obtrusive example of symbolic writings. The story abounds with narrative descriptions of the life of seclusion and isolation. It hinges on the protagonist, Twyla, who lives in an orphanage where she encounters her friend Roberta. Morrison renders the story a distinctive literary quality by shedding light on the protagonist who is considered as an archetype of African-American people. Tawyla



herself symbolizes isolation as she begins her life a recluse at the orphanage where she images her mother dancing in front of her and Roberta: “my mother danced all night and Roberta was sick. That’s why we were taken to St. Bonny’s” (p.2253). The protagonist, Twyla, is the subject of symbolism here. And this symbolism is expressed by means of the theme of recluse because she is now a deserted recluse at the orphanage. Being so, the life of isolation is introduced by the story’s narrative depiction of the spatial setting which is the orphanage itself since literary symbols “carry a deeper meaning beyond their literal significance” (De Marco, 2025a, p.101). In this sense, Twyla and the orphanage are the symbolic embodiment of the story’s thematic descriptions of isolation and seclusion.

Twyla, furthermore, exemplifies the common people’s predilection to be in safe havens where they are not intimidated by any form of social bias. In this sense, she symbolizes Morrison’s obsession with finding viable solutions for people with severe tendency to be in utter isolation. Isolation is conveyed through the narrative details about the protagonist, and it is expressed as a theme on the intrapersonal affairs. That is, Twyla could not find anyone to be in good relationship when she first entered the orphanage. As a result, she develops conscious reconciliation with herself in order to overcome her personal isolation. The theme of isolation, therefore, intersects with the protagonist as a symbol of being recluse. This is due to the fact that she lives in Bellevue; a place in which Twyla and Roberta feel that they are detached from their social reality. This place incarnation of Morrison’s symbolic descriptions of Twyla’s life throughout the narrative incidents; and she describes the place as follows: “no big long room with one hundred beds like Bellevue” (p.2253). Consequently, the Bellevue and the orphanage are the spatial places employed by Morrison’s narrative point of view. These places are reinforced by their symbolic importance since “a literary symbol combines an image with a concept” (Alhaj, 2015, p.13). Moreover, these spatial symbols are created by the theme of seclusion that represents the living states of Twyla in the orphanage.

The character of Twyla is a symbolic embodiment of the theme of isolation. She stands for the notions of deprivations and marginalization exerted against the African minority. The African people resorted to the life of seclusion due to the oppressive living condition surrounding them. Twyla, in this respect, she incarnates the core conceptual meaning of recluse life. Morrison utilizes Twyla’s character as a symbol of a cry of outrage against oppression and marginalization. Strikingly, this cry is conveyed through the spatial setting expressed in the orphanage and some other places, like a room where she could find personal stability and serenity: “there were four to a room,



and when Roberta and me came, there was a shortage of state kids, so we were the only ones assigned to 406 and could go from bed to bed if we wanted to” (p. 2253). Consequently, the symbolic implications of Twyla’s personality are a textual clue to the exploration of Morrison’s profound obsession with depicting meticulous living details about the life of the marginalized peoples. Such depiction emanates from Morrison’s own perception of the marginalized people whose lives are devastated by indirectly forcing them to be in utter isolation and seclusion. In essence, isolation and seclusion are concomitant themes carrying out the author’s creation of symbolic characters that help in adding new and unprecedented meanings to the interpretation of literary texts. This is because the symbolic function the characters is to provide the author’s with a thematic vehicle for literary expressions in “via precise narrative descriptions” (Abu Jweid and Aldhafeeri, 2023, p.1).

The duality of symbols and themes intertwine with each other in the story. Morrison projects her own authorial insights regarding the character of Twyla whose isolation is created by family circumstances. These circumstances, in turn, are created by the social conditions of the family that also suffered from deprivation and isolation. As a result, Twyla’s character and disposition are formed and shaped by the surrounding social milieus where she encountered negative living conditions affecting her personality and relationships with other people. Her plights and sufferings are not mitigate when she is introduced to the orphanage because it is also deemed a bleak house for the African people. These conditions make her confused and she does not know how to cope with the new social changes around her: “but I didn’t know. I thought it was just the opposite” (p.2265). In this sense, she could not distinguish her position in the orphanage which is another place for her ordeals to a great extent. To put it another way, it is the place of her symbolic sufferings and marginalization inflicted upon her personality. Furthermore, the symbolic vitality of Twyla’s character is sustained by the related themes engulfing her social life because a literary theme “serves as a mirror to the human condition” (p.164). As a result, the amalgamation of themes and symbols reflects Morrison’s authorial dexterity used to pave the way for better understanding of her characters’ social positions.

The narrative peculiarities of literary work are empowered by the indirect nuances of symbols (Al-Fartoosi et al, 4470). Symbols serve as secondary reinforcement of literary meanings. As a rule of thumb, symbols have two interrelated functions. First, the direct or the target function grasped by the reader in a normal way. Second, the indirect meaning that needs to be grasped and interpreted in an innovative way. Both meanings



represent the narrative interplay between the events and their realistic reflection of reality. Twyla, similarly, exemplifies the dual nature of literary symbols which hold the two meanings in a perfect literary manner. She describes the normal view of African people in the vicinity of Howard Johnson which is crowded place with people from African origins: “busloads of blacks and whites came into Howard Johnson’s together. They roamed together then: students, musicians, lovers, protesters” (p.2265). In this scene, Twyla stands for the direct and the indirect or the implied indication of literary symbols.

On the one hand, she represents the normal and typical lives of African people who live and interact with each other on the same social regions. On the other hand, her view of African embodies the true sense of marginalization and deprivation underwent by the African people. Hence, the bitter conditions could be perfectly understood by tracing their implied symbolic meaning initiated by Twyla’s narrative point of view. This is evident in her perception of reality and people controlled by severe social upheavals which negatively influence her character. As previously argued, Twyla’s personality is the core essence of the marginalization and deprivation as she leads very miserable life. She is introduced to several places before she lives at the orphanage that is considered as the ultimate destination of her destitute. These places, together with her life at the orphanage, construct the story’s thematic and symbolic narrative paradigm. The significance of themes and symbols is mutual because they complete each other on the grounds of narrative considerations, and; in this way, the function of “themes is a transformative journey that expands our horizons, deepens our empathy, and challenges us to think critically about the world” (De Marco, 2025, p.23). Being so, the narrative function of literary themes is inseparable as they have complementary importance that could not be easily ignored in the process of analyzing literary works.

Twyla’s living conditions exemplify her psychological barriers reinforced by the surrounding social circumstances influencing her whole life. She could not cope with the new life at the orphanage, especially when she is introduced to live with other people. Moreover, she loses her mother, which intensifies her life and makes her a complete recluse. The narrative events play a crucial and vital role in representing her true character after the limited social interlocations with other people at the orphanage. The narrative events are created by Twyla’s view of her position at the orphanage tighter with other deprived people, especially Roberta: “there she was. In a silvery evening gown and dark fur coat” (p.2269). Being the spatial setting of the story, the orphanage is a symbol of seclusion and deprivation exerted against the African people. The narrative



events are the appropriate vehicle used by Morrison to deal with this fictional fact that reflects the typical and realistic view of African people in their social regions.

Literary symbols represent the fictional patterns and thematic stereotypes harnessed by the author to depict reality in different narrative layers. They have functional importance for limiting and exploring the target meaning if the text's portrayals of the characters and setting in exceptional ways because "the text's fictions and characters are all mimetic" (Berrio, 1992, p.355). Here, symbols are the nexus of literary mimesis that embodies the process of imitation; whereby authors utilize literary components and elements to imitate reality through themes and symbols to a great extent. Twyla has a deep predilection to have her mother's care, but she is deprived of it. This deprivation is the impetus of her social and psychological barriers developed after the accumulation of personal experience at the orphanage. Event Roberta deserts her for some time; and she truly feels her seclusion and isolation: "I still go soft when I smell one or the other. Roberta was going home. The big cross and the big Bible was coming to get her and she seemed sort of glad and sort of not" (p.2259). In this case, she losses her intimate companionship because the narrative events leading to her seclusion and isolation are connected with the loss of belonging to family, friends, society and so forth.

The narrative events are the possible viable literary elements employed by Morrison to offer a comprehensive view of the African people's social lives. She gives Twyla a genuine and creative literary attributes that could not be located in the context of the plot. The spatial setting also sustained the story's symbols quality due to its regional capacity to cast literary significance upon Twyla' character as an exemplification of the African plights and sufferings. This is apparent in the relationship between Twyla and Roberta who are deprived and marginalized at the orphanage. Both of them are victims of family disintegration and social fragmentation. Twyla relates this experience through the narrative events about her life with Roberta: "Roberta had messed up my past somehow with that business about Maggie. I wouldn't forget a thing like that. Would I?" (p.2262). in this sense, Twyla and Robert do not have any form of good living requirements. They interact with each other on the grounds of mutual respects and appreciation as they are restricted within the spatial demarcation of the orphanage. The orphanage itself has a profound symbolic meaning in expressing and empowering the theme of seclusion and isolation since the typical "works of literature can be viewed as symbols of something or as structures of symbols" (Thompson, 2011, p.104). Consequently, the reciprocal nature between



themes and symbols is highlighted by the authorial innovative use of narrative events and their pertinent descriptions.

Twyla incarnates the symbolic appropriation of the life of deprivation and marginalization. She embodies Morrison's utilization of textual clues about the view of specific social minority that is a victim of social negligence. The archetypal attributes of marginalization comprise Twyla' tendency to get rid of her psychological and social barriers imposed on her by the orphanage. Therefore, the orphanage, as previously argued is the symbol of the limited regional demarcation of the protagonist together with other people of the same race. Literary themes, accordingly, are linked with the symbols to reveal the authorial view of society at critical social changes; and symbols could carry out "the formal and thematic variations given to the themes are considered next" (Pettersson, 2016, p.7). As such, the duality of themes and symbols work together to unravel the authorial concentration upon the life of people from a specific social class. The literary treatment of this class could not be easily identified via the direct impression about people and society outside the text.

This impression could be deduced from the indirect implications of literary themes and symbols embedded within the entire narrative structure of literature works. Morrison appropriates all these literary matters within the wide and comprehensive scope of the fictional events utilized to shed light on the African people and their related social matters. This is evident in the feeling of alienation sensed by Twyla who considers herself as an outsider in her society though she belongs to the same ethnic race: "we passed like strangers. A black girl and a white girl meeting in a Howard Johnson's on the road and having nothing to say" (p.2253). These lines describes Twyla's authentic living conditions in her society. This is because she feels her true isolation and seclusion from her society, and Morrison uses thematic and symbols narrative events about Twyla's character and the orphanage's spatial setting to depict this reality.

4. Conclusion

This study focused on the use of themes and symbols in Morrison's "Recitatif." The discussion of themes and symbols are significant due to the possibility of revealing new meanings projected in the bulk of the story. The interpretation of literary symbols and themes relied on Morrison's terse use of expression through depicting realistic events in fictional descriptions. Consequently, the study highlighted the narrative embodiment of the protagonist's life portrayed in the layers of the story. In this way, the story could be



further studied by exploring the symbolic attributes of the events that are needed for innovating genuine and unprecedented analysis of Morrison's employment of literary themes and symbols. Accordingly, the study's contribution lies in three related findings.

First, the study highlighted the use of literary symbols which is almost neglected in previous studies on the story. As such, the discussion of symbols could unravel Morrison's concern with realistic issues outside her narrative events. In this regard, symbols are found in the characters, setting, and narrative events that are the essence of the plot. Hence, the analysis of symbols is a significant contribution to the discovery of new meanings inserted in the course of the narrative incidents. Second, the study approached the story's symbols via themes. Both themes and symbols are highly important for bridging the gap between the text and reality. As a matter of fact, themes represent topics or subject matters depicted in the plot. Yet, they adopt new and creative characteristics when they are tackled by symbolic analysis. Third, the study demonstrated how symbols could be employed to identify the projected meanings and nuances in the entire literary text. In this way, the story might be approached by elaborating its symbolic attributes which play a decisive factor in dealing with the authorial precise use of diction, expression, objects, characters, and places. This authorial precision is sustained by the narrative description of reality and people who are the true target of symbols. This is because of their fictional image portrayed in the plot where the events play a significant role in delving deep onto the ultimate moral of the literary work per se.

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