

LOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S LOVE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper analysis great African American writers female novelist, Toni Morrison. Morrison explores the theme of love into prejudice in her eighth novel, *Love*. It is human drama at its best, and mind-blowing novel that is deep in its complexities of love: parental, self, romantic and friendship. Devotion is an exploration into the deepest regions of these most complicated of human emotions. While this separation is ultimately tragic, recognizing the betrayal may be the only way to reveal the love that can be found, not simply through family, but through the recovery of sisterhood. *Love* shows how common oppression in American society impression individuals and relationships. It also blame the African American community for its tradition of oppressing and exploiting women and children. Alternating its perspective among the women characters, emotion is an elegant bomb that shook my heart to the core. While it's true that Bill Cooney was the center of the women's world, the novel is more about the interactions between the women.

Keywords: Love, Toni Morrison, gender, sex.

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's novel, *Love*, is a story of just that: love's many faces and effects on those who love. This story talks of love as shadowed by greed, jealousy, insanity, and prejudice.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, essayist, editor, teacher and professor emeritus at Princeton University. Toni Morrison, the most recent American recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, writing in a distinctive lyrical prose style, published her controversial debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to widespread critical acclaim in 1970. Coming on the heels of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, the novel, widely studied in American schools, includes an elaborate description of incestuous rape and explores the conventions of beauty established by a historically racist society, painting a portrait of a self-immolating black family in search of beauty in whiteness. Since then, Morrison has experimented with lyric fantasy, as in her two best-known later works, *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987), for which she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction; along these lines, critic Harold Bloom has drawn favourable comparisons to Virginia Woolf, and the Nobel committee to "Faulkner and to the Latin American tradition [of magical realism]." *Beloved* was chosen in a 2006 survey conducted by the New York Times as the most important work of fiction of the last 25 years.

Love in Toni Morrison's Love

"People tell me I am always writing about love. I nod, yes, but it isn't true—not exactly. In fact, I am always writing about betrayal. Love is the weather. Betrayal is that lightning that cleaves and reveals it"

In Toni Morrison's foreword to her 2003 novel *Love*, the author positions her latest work as a continuance of themes explored in the body of her literary career. It consists of African American characters struggling to form identity in a world where racial inequality and sexism are inescapable.

Family often forms the primary grouping through which Morrison explores the development of identity. It is within the family whether biologically, maritally, or platonically formed that Morrison confronts the themes of love and betrayal and the struggle these conflicting forces create within the individual. Especially for female characters whose identities have been warped by the struggle to love one another in the face of abandonment. Abandonment as a form of betrayal is central in the characterization of the prominent female figures Heed the Night, Christine, and Junior in *Love*. It centres on the trauma that each woman has suffered in her past and affect the women in present. While every woman has a history of individual experiences that shape their psyches and their identities are intertwined.

Morrison asserts that the relationship central to the novel may not be the more obvious pairing of Heed and Christine, but the triad of Heed, Christine, and Junior. She writes: "among the things Christine, Heed, and Junior have already lost, besides their innocence and their faith, are a father and a mother, or, to be more precise, fathering and mothering" (Foreword). Their families have betrayed them all through neglect; unfit parents who hinder their achievement of self-actualization have abandoned the three women.

Though the three women avoid feeling connected to one another, their reactions to betrayal manifest in similar ways. Struggling to gain agency and overcome the traumatic experiences of her past, each character becomes consumed by the sexual aspects of her identity. Each has relied on heterosexuality as a means to remedy the trauma of abandonment and as a way of obtaining power. In the opening chapter, the omniscient voice of the ghostly 'L', describes the tale of the Cosey family that is about to unfold as a story of "female recklessness" (L4). The women are both reckless with themselves and reckless with each other, embracing their sexual power, while forsaking the strength that can be found through strong female bonds. *Love* provides a strong example of Morrison's examination of female African American characters failing to overcome oppression because their identities are inextricably bound within the systems that oppress them. Heed, Christine, and Junior are bound to each other in a triangular structure that supports a unity between the three women, and the women are individually bound to Bill Cosey in triangular structures of sexual identity, within which the consequences of sexism, racism, and classism damage the their self-actualization, and consequently, their relationships with each other. *Love* tells the story of Bill Cosey and the women, who love him, fight over him, make him miserable, and finally drive him to his grave. As the novel begins, Mr. Cosey has long-since died under suspicious circumstances, but his memory and his presence live on inspiring a deep and lasting hatred between his granddaughter Christine and his widow Heed.

As youngsters, Christine and Heed were best friends until the day Mr. Cosey decided he would take Heed, at the tender age of eleven, for his wife. From that moment, bitterness and envy drove the friends apart, and now they live together in an enmity so deep and so rancorous that it seems only the death of one or both will free them from it. Mr. Cosey's will a handwritten note scrawled on a menu in 1965 is in dispute, as is the ownership of the house Heed claims to own and in which Christine is allowed to live. The struggle to verify or nullify that note drives the women to new depths, and when a street-smart young woman named Junior arrives to help Heed write a family history, Christine rightly senses a deception, and their dispute takes on a deadly urgency.

But *Love* is about much more than a disputed will and divided affections. It is about love itself, in all its glorious and ruinous incarnations, from compassion to lust, and it is about family, history, race, gender, and all the ways these forces shape and often distort an individual's life. Love is also about what to make of a man like Bill Cosey, a man who created a resort where black people were treated with respect and could debate "death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it," a man who took families off the plantation and gave them jobs, but also a man who married an eleven-year-old child and then fell in love with a prostitute named Celestial. He is a rich, complex character, hard to understand, hard to condemn, hard condoning.

Morrison further complicates the convergence of racial identity and sexual identity through *Love's* time frame from the 1940s through the 1990s. This particular expanse of time allows Morrison to address how the Civil Rights movement failed to better the lives of many African American women. Barbara Christian describes a discrepancy between the figment of the idealized African American family, which was perpetuated from the 1960s on, and the actualities of domestic violence and struggle that took place within these families. She asserts that violence and struggle within these situations led to internalizations of this destruction, particularly for women and that that destruction goes "against the monumental image of the strong black woman who could bear anything, would bear anything, an image so often invoked by black society" (L 125).

Toni Morrison's novel, *Love*, is a story of just that: love's many faces and effects on those who love. This story talks of love as shadowed by greed, jealousy, insanity, and hatred. Forty years ago, Cosey's Hotel and Resort in Up Beach was the escape for well-off colored-folk of the East Coast. In a time when segregation was still alive, blacks needed a place to socialize, have fun, and leave the rest of the world behind. Bill Cosey offered them just that. He ran a profitable business where all his guests felt they belonged. He was a rich black businessman, respected in the community, and above all else, a ladies' man. The relationships of this ladies' man with the women that surround him are the guiding elements of Morrison's novel, both thematically and formally. While during his life these women--his wife, granddaughter, daughter-in-law, employees, and others--vied for his attention, following his death, their rivalries only grew stronger, as manifested by the arguments over his will. The novel's chapter titles, 'Husband', 'Lover', 'Father', 'Friend', and 'Benefactor' parallel the different ways these women characterize Bill Cosey.

Even Junior, the young girl hired as Cosey's widow's companion seems to worship his memory, although she never knew him in life. These women idealize Cosey as their own "perfect man," only seeing what they wish, and blind to his duality. That is, they are all blind except L. L's is the voice of this narrative. She has seen all of these relationships develop, watched some fall apart, and kept hidden the secrets she learned along the way about the infamous Bill Cosey. This is her story of the events that took place over forty years. She weaves her judgements of the women--Heed, Christine, May, Vida, Junior, even Celestial--through her series of recollections, all the while revealing her own infatuation with Bill Cosey. L's narration is the glue that holds the multiple story lines of *Love* together. Told as a series of flashbacks, Morrison follows the development of her characters through time, although she takes care to reveal their personalities slowly, keeping the reader eager for explanations of sometimes shocking actions.

Morrison ensures the page-turner quality of her novel. However, the incessant jumping from past to present may leave the reader quite confused. As Morrison waits to reveal the relationships between certain characters and the forces behind their emotions, one may find it difficult to keep track of who's who and what's what. But in classic bring-it-home fashion, by the end of the novel Morrison ties up all the loose ends, bringing the past and present together.

While I do view this novel as a page-turner, I must warn readers to not turn the pages too quickly. There are many characters and events to keep track of throughout this story, and paying careful attention to detail while reading will guarantee the novel's narrative force and full emotional impact when all the connections are finally made. Morrison's *Love* is an ever-moving tribute to the past, all the while making evident the realities of the present. Morrison's characters are full of life, emotions, and perfect vehicles through which the complexities of human behavior are uncovered. Morrison does a fabulous job of navigating through the tale of a group of women all enamored with one man. As the novel suggests, love takes many shapes and can lead to an innumerable amount of reactions when confronted with adversity.

Toni Morrison's *All of her work* is rich in myth, metaphor, mirth, wisdom, humanity and biblical references. *Love* is an exploration into the deepest regions of these most complicated of human emotions. Culture and society are rich in examples of how mere mortals have always attempted to understand the animal attraction between two people and, in doing so, to rationalize the essences of passion and romance. Ancient myths, poems, plays, novels, songs, folklore, fairy tales, film, advertising and popular culture in general all reflect peoples' preoccupation with love and its dizzying impact on the human psyche; both lover and beloved are equally bewildered by its bewitching spell. In a recent interview Morrison said, "I was interested in the way in which sexual love and other kinds of love lend themselves to betrayal. Bill Cosey, around whom the story is written, has been dead for twenty-five years. But he is still a very real presence to the women who shared his life. During the 1940s he became a millionaire as the owner of Cosey's Hotel and Resort, "the best and best known vacation spot for colored folk on the East Coast. Everybody came ... guests from as far away as Michigan and NY couldn't wait to get down here. [The] resort was more than a playground; it was a school and a haven where people debated death in the cities, murder in Mississippi, and what they planned to do about it other than grieve and stare at their children."

The women who inhabit Cosey's world are Heed, his second wife, the girl he married when she was eleven and now is a recluse determined to keep the family's legacy; Christine, his granddaughter, who was Heed's best friend until she married Cosey and became an enemy; May, Christine's mother, Cosey's daughter-in-law and widow of his only son Billy Boy; Vida, a former employee who, while grateful to Cosey, was never fooled by him, nor did she believe he died a natural death; Celestial, his pleasure woman, the only one who asks to be his equal and who was able to inspire his romantic love; Junior, recently released from Correctional who talks herself into a job as "assistant" to the aging Heed, who needs help with a nefarious plan; and the "humming" voice of L, the hotel's former cook --- her presence is quite ghostly but her words wise as she opens and then closes the story.

A novel about the past, *Love* begins closer to the present, with a young woman, Junior Viviane, long a resident of juvenile correctional halls, applying for a job in the big house at One Monarch Street, inhabited by two warring women: Heed Cosey, Bill's much younger second wife, now his widow, and Christine, his granddaughter.

Morrison reveals the interconnectedness of their lives, the strange ways they are related and the strong bond they maintain despite their mutual hostility. In doing so she depicts a large cast of mostly compelling characters who haunt the novel's periphery: Christine's mother, May Cosey, whose husband died early and left her the thankless job of running her father-in-law's hotel; L, the gifted cook who provides a balanced commentary against the hysterical grievances of the main characters; and Sandler Gibbons, Bill's fishing buddy whose grandson, Romen, now works for the Cosey women and is Junior's lover.

Such missteps reveal just how forcefully Morrison is straining to make *Love* work, to stretch a threadbare family saga to cover such large ideas about race and gender. That she does make it work at all, that her insights more often than not hit their targets, and that *Love* is readable and fascinating seem like an extreme act of will, and there is a certain purity in such literary labor. Morrison works so hard in *Love*, and her hard work pays off for her and for the reader mostly.

Conclusion

The tragedy of *Love* is the manifestation of the societal influences on a microcosmic level, where betrayal occurs. While this disruption is ultimately tragic, recognizing the betrayal may be the only way to reveal the love that can be found, not simply through family, but through the recovery of sisterhood. *Love* shows how gendered oppression in American society marks individuals and relationships. It also criticises the African American community for its tradition of oppressing and exploiting women and children.

For Morrison the lack of loving and benevolent elders is the most important factor in the degeneration of the younger generation. She examines how society creates individuals and family victims of society's norms and environment of gender, sex and love.

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