Perception and Power Through Naming: Characters in Search of a Self in the Fiction of Toni Morrison

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"When I use a word," said Humpty Dumpty in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

—Lewis Carroll,
Through the Looking Glass

Humpty Dumpty was correct to see the important connection between language and power; and if Lewis Carroll had developed this discussion further, he might have had his characters comment as well on the interrelationship between language and thought, language and culture, and language and social change. While linguists and anthropologists continue the difficult debate about whether language *is* culture or is merely "related" to culture, and while sociolinguists and psychologists question the effects of language on society and on the psyche, American blacks and women understand all too well that "He is master who can define,"[1] and that the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game but a grasping of experience and a key to action.

Since Aristotle's *Organon* described the theory of opposition and the logical relation between a simple affirmation and the corresponding simple denial, Western thought has worked by oppositions:

Man/Woman, Father/Mother, Head/Heart, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature, White/Black, Master/Slave, etc.; and Standard English has reflected a peculiarly Western need to rank and quantify. Toni Morrison, in each of her four novels, has combined conventional and creative components of language to reveal the ways in which black culture is reflected and distorted "through the looking glass" of white culture; and Morrison's novels, taken together, provide a startling critique of the inadequacy of existing language and the destructiveness of the simplistic two-term patterns which have shaped much of Western thought since Aristotle. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), for example, shows what happens when "beauty" and "ugliness" are placed in opposition, and *Sula* (1973) explodes the demarcations between "good" and "evil" and between "innocence" and guilt." *Song of Solomon* (1978) destroys fixed notions of being alive or "Dead" and of "love" and "hate," and it continues to develop the motif from the two earlier novels of the power of naming. Finally, *Tar Baby* (1982) reveals how false and inadequate are the apparent divisions between nature and culture, servant and master, black and white; and it shows as well the impossibility of delineating between exile and rescue and between victimization and power. In addition, each of Morrison's novels deals with the difficult question of black identity—how it is defined and named to begin with, how it becomes perverted, and how it can be realized and reclaimed in this world.

I

Toni Morrison's first novel is about racism and its ugly byproducts within a black community. *The Bluest Eye* depicts a world of "cu-ute" Shirley Temple dolls and Mary Jane candies, where Jean Harlow is the ideal of all that is beautiful and where white standards of beauty and behavior have twisted the identities of black children and adults. The novel tells the story of two sisters, Frieda and Claudia MacTeer, and of their friend Pecola Breedlove, whose intense desire for blue eyes leads to her final tragedy.

The "ugliness" of the ironically named Breedlove family is central to this book. Pecola spends hours in front of her mirror "trying to discover the secret of her ugliness"[2] (39, BE) and praying that God will make her disappear. The narrator says of Pecola and her family:

> You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you

looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it (34, BE).

Morrison makes it evident that neither Pecola nor her family will ever know their own beauty, for they see themselves only according to the standards of "some mysterious all-knowing master" and through the eyes of people whose notions of beauty come from white society. As the narrator points out, physical beauty is one of the "most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (97, BE).

Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda do not begin to have "contempt for their own blackness" and to share in "the exquisitely learned self-hatred of their race" until they encounter Maureen Peal, "a high-yellow dream child." Pointedly nicknamed "Meringue Pie" by the two sisters, Maureen taunts Claudia, Frieda and Pecola and screams, "I *am* cute. And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I *am* cute!" Claudia narrates:

> We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she *was*—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser (61, BE).

In spite of the anger and jealousy the girls feel when they become aware of the effect "the Maureen Peals of the world" have on others, Claudia admits:

> And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (62,BE).

The point is made that when an unnamed *Thing* is pervasive in a culture, it may remain invisible or be rendered unrecognizable if it is not named, or if it is *mis*named.

At the end of *The Bluest Eye*, when Pecola's baby has died and she spends her days lost in madness picking through garbage, Claudia looks back with understanding:

> All of us—all who knew her— felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor . . . We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength (159, BE).

Claudia sees, finally, that she and Frieda are not completely innocent with regard to Pecola, that they too have "assassinated" something in her. Morrison makes it clear that the sisters and others in the community have defined themselves in relation to, and always in oppostion to, Pecola. By depending on the existence of Pecola as the other half of their own equations, and by making Pecola Object and themselves Subject; they succeed in creating an Other but are unable to create a Self.

II

In *The Bluest Eye*, Soaphead Church, "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams," writes a letter to God in which he asks, "What makes one name more a person than another? Is the name the real thing, then? And the person only what his name says?" (142, BE). In *Sula*, Toni Morrison gives us a universe where black people live "up in the Bottom" and where even "the Bottom" collapses, and she illustrates that naming can be, and often is, a subversive activity. Here one grown man is called BoyBoy and another, "with milky skin and cornsilk hair," is called TarBaby. Here, two women named Wright are often wrong, while those named Peace sometimes kill; and here a boy named "dewey," with beautiful deep black skin and golden eyes, is indistinguishable from a red-headed, freckle-faced, light-skinned boy named "dewey," who is indistinguishable from a half-Mexican boy with chocolate skin and black bangs named "dewey."

Unlike Pecola and other characters in *The Bluest Eye* who take their definitions of what they ought to be from billboards, movies, and the glances of others, Sula Peace leads an "experimental life" and sets out to "make herself." Sula is restless, independent, totally self-

reliant; and because she is free and is willing to take risks unhampered by the norms of her community, she is an enigma and a threat. Morrison uses the other main characters in *Sula* (particularly Shadrack, Eva and the deweys, and Nel), to place Sula in relief and to demonstrate why she becomes "dangerous."

Shadrack, the first character Morrison introduces in *Sula*, is "blasted and permanently astonished" by his participation in the First World War. He "walks about with his penis out, pees in front of ladies and girl-children," and is "the only black who could curse white people and get away with it" (53, S). Having learned in the War about the unexpectedness of death, Shadrack has instituted National Suicide Day as the one day each year on which people might kill themselves or each other. In this way, he believes, he is "making a place for fear as a way of controlling it" (12, S). Morrison uses Shadrack and his controlled madness and organized eccentricity in contrast to Sula and her freedom. The narrator says of Shadrack: "Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things" (13, S). In contrast, the townspeople cannot understand Sula's freedom or the nature of her "experimental life"; and because they cannot fit her into the scheme of things, they "fingerprint her for all time" with names and labels (97, S). Just as Shadrack labels National Suicide Day to contain and limit fear, the townspeople label Sula "evil"; and their naming her "the source of their personal misfortune" helps them survive the chaos of living.

Similarly, Eva Peace—Sula's mysterious, one-legged grandmother—uses names to manipulate chaos into an appearance of order. Reigning from a wagon on the third floor of 7 Carpenter's Road, Eva is a crippled deity "directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (26, S). One of Eva's particular creations is a trinity of deweys, three little boys who arrive at Eva's house at different times with nothing but their woolen caps and their names. Eva takes away their caps, ignores their names, and calls each one "dewey." When people complain, Eva retorts, "What you need to tell them apart for? They's all deweys" (32, S). The deweys are very different from one another in coloring, size, and age, but in time—with Eva saying things like "Send one of them deweys out to get me some Garret" or, "Tell them deweys to cut out that noise," and "Send me a

dewey"—each boy accepts Eva's viewpoint and becomes "in fact as well as in name a dewey" (33, S). By the time they go to school, the teacher cannot tell the deweys apart; and eventually, it is rumored, one of their mothers comes to claim her son and cannot tell which boy is hers.

Sula, unlike the deweys, will not conform to anyone's expectations. While Eva revels in her power, delights in naming and creating the deweys, and informs Sula that she ought to settle down and have children, Sula insists: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (80, S).

Even as a young girl growing up in the Bottom, Sula was active and unusually independent. At eleven, she and her best friend, Nel Wright, discovered that

> they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them; they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on (44, S).

Sula and Nel are bound for life by a guilty secret about their role in a small boy's drowning; and although Sula leaves the Bottom and stays away for ten years after Nel marries, Sula's eventual return to Medallion is, for Nel, "like getting the use of an eye back" (82, S). When Sula begins sleeping with almost everyone's husband, including Nel's, however, Nel can neither understand nor forgive what is to her a betrayal of their friendship.

Sula's flouting of local taboos causes the entire community to unite against her:

> Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes, and in general band together against the devil in their midst (102, S).

The people in the Bottom use Sula—"roach," "bitch," "devil," "witch" —as a tension to rub up against and as the evil Other compared to whom they are good. Interestingly, when Sula is dead, people stop making an effort to be good to one another, and , the narrator tells us, affection for others sinks into "flaccid disrepair" (132, S).

As Sula lies dying, Nel comes to visit her for the first time in several years. The women argue, and as Nel is leaving Sula alone to die, Sula asks, "How you know? About who was good. How you know it was you?" (126, S). And after Sula's death, when Nel visits Eva in a nursing home, the old woman confuses Nel with her granddaughter. Eva demands to know how Nel killed Chicken Little, and Nel insists that it was Sula who threw the boy into the water. Eva snaps: "You. Sula. What's the difference . . . Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you . . . " (144-145, S).

At the end of the novel, Morrison gives her readers the satisfaction of Nel's learning, finally, to recognize Sula's glory; but we are left wondering about Shadrack, who is "still energetically mad"; and about Eva, who "feeble-minded or not . . . knew what she was doing. Always had" (147, S); and about the deweys, who apparently died in an accident in 1941, but who seem to have been resurrected in the young people of 1965 who "had a look about them that everybody said was new but which reminded Nel of the deweys whom nobody had ever found" (140, S).

In *Sula*, then, Morrison both challenges traditional assumptions about morality and critiques language by revealing that it is impossible ever to sort out completely the good from the bad or the innocent from the guilty. By depicting a universe where creation and naming subvert personal identity, Morrison demonstrates that our modes of discourse and of thought have gotten out of control and that the strategies humans have used to survive are themselves bringing about destruction and pain.

III

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola saw herself only through the eyes of other people. In *Sula*, the main character invented herself and led an experimental life; but, we are told, "She had no center, no speck around which to grow" (103, S). In Toni Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*, protagonist Milkman Dead is confused about who he is and about the direction his life should take. By the time Milkman is five years old, it has become his habit to concentrate "on things behind him almost as though there were no future to be had" (35, Song); and at twenty-two, he is described by the narrator as having a face which

> taken apart, looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked a coherence, a coming together of the features into a

> total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner or someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back (69-70, Song).

When Milkman finally chooses to turn back, his journey into the past leads to knowledge of his real name and results in his "coming together" into a "total self."

The first chapter of *Song of Solomon* sets up Morrison's motif of naming, with intricate and often amusing descriptions of the processes involved in the naming of places in the black community. The author relates, for example, how the residents reclaimed Mains Avenue from the U.S. Post Office and the city legislators and renamed it Not Doctor Street; she tells, too, how they renamed the so-called charity hospital, where no blacks could practice medicine or be admitted as patients, No Mercy Hospital. In addition, Morrison provides a rich documentation of the history and naming of her characters. Milkman, for example, received his name from the town gossip, who saw him still nursing at his mother's breast at a time when his legs were "dangling almost to the floor"; and Milkman's father, Macon Dead, was named after the first Macon Dead, whose name was the result of a recording error made by a clerk at the Freedmen's Bureau. Macon Dead explains:

> The man behind the desk was drunk. He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, "He's dead." Asked him who owned him, Papa said, "I'm free." Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces . . . In the space for his name the fool wrote, "Dead" comma "Macon" (53, Song).

The first Macon Dead's wife liked the name, said it was new "and would wipe out the past" (54, Song), but the second Macon Dead is angry at the wiped out past and thinks:

> Surely he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name (17-18, Song).

Much of the story of the novel is Milkman's search for real names and for this longed-for ancestor.

Milkman's quest begins with his wonderful Aunt Pilate. [Pilate's

name had been selected when her father, the first Macon Dead, unable to read or write, pointed to a word in the Bible and copied it painstakingly onto a piece of paper. Pilate keeps the handwritten name her father gave her in a brass snuff box which hangs from her ear—a bizarre earring proclaiming that *her* name can never be lost or taken from her.] With information from Pilate, Milkman pieces together the puzzle of his ancestry and journeys south.

In the small Southern town where his grandparents lived before moving north, Milkman goes coon hunting with a group of men and experiences a mystical journey to his true self.

> He found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged to it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp (284, Song).

Here Milkman realizes that he is his *own* roots, and we realize that he has become the lithe young man about whom his father dreamed. By going into the earth and feeling himself a part of it, Milkman connects with the past and perceives that he and the world are not Dead, but alive.

Soon after Milkman learns his grandparents' real names and after he realizes his identity, his closest friend, Guitar, reveals his intent to murder Milkman. A revolutionary who belongs to a black terrorist organization which murders whites out of "love" for blacks, Guitar has stalked Milkman from the North to the South because of a misunderstanding between them. At the end of the novel, Guitar's love kills Pilate and presumably will kill his dear friend, too; and Milkman knows that

> anything could appear to be something else, and probably was. Nothing could be taken for granted. Women who loved you tried to cut your throat, while women who didn't even know your name scrubbed your back. Witches could sound like Katharine Hepburn and your best friend could try to strangle you. Smack in the middle of an orchid there might be a blob of jello and inside a Mickey Mouse doll, a fixed and radiant star (335, Song).

Like Milkman, readers of Toni Morrison also know by now that nothing can be taken for granted in her fictional universe.

On the final page of the novel, both Pilate and Milkman are free of being Dead and are flying. As Milkman is laying Pilate's dead body on

a rock, a bird dives into the new grave where Pilate has just buried her father's bones along with the earring which holdname. The bird scoops Pilate's earring in its beak and flies away, and Milkman realizes: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (340, Song). He stands up to fly too, though he knows that Guitar will shoot him. Milkman has discovered what his great-grandfather knew, that "If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (341, Song). The promise set forth on the book's opening page has been kept: "The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names."

Unlike the naming in *Sula* which gave order to, but took freedom away from, that which was named, the naming in *Song of Solomon* gives knowledge, freedom, and flight to those who know their names. Morrison suggests here that once false naming is corrected and a true naming or renaming takes place, death ends and life begins. Naming and renaming become revolutionary acts: i.e. people name parts of the world for themselves, and as they choose or rediscover their true names, they upset a world order which has been taken for granted for centuries, and they make possible new ways of viewing the world and of living in it.

IV

In *Tar Baby,* Morrison continues the critique of language and novel, Morrison deals with individuals and groups in relationship—men and women, blacks and whites, servants and masters; and she demonstrates, in the hopeless love affair between Jadine and Son, the impossibility of separating culture from nature and of differentiating rescue from exile.

As an intruder-outlaw in the home of Jadine's white benefactor, Son spends several long nights hidden in Jadine's bedroom watching her sleep:

> He had thought hard during those times in order to manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her so she would not wake or stir or turn over on her stomach but would lie still and dream steadily the dreams he wanted her to have about yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you! and the fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on a line . . . Oh, he thought hard, very hard during those times to press his dreams of icehouses into hers . . . (119, TB).

Jadine is not a woman who can allow a man to "insert his dreams into her own," however. She fights hard in the struggle against being what Margaret Atwood calls "a captive princess in someone's head"; so when Son and Jadine first speak, he knows there is danger. She will after all, be playing tar baby to his rabbit. Son senses in the beginning that "at any moment she might talk back or, worse, press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-colored silk into him and then who would mind the pie table in the basement of the church?" (120, TB).

Jadine is a black woman who likes *Ave Maria* better than gospel music and Picasso better than Itumba masks, and it is unlikely that she will want to share Son's dreams of life in the briar patch. Her struggle is depicted in her encounters with the "night women," who in "their exceptional femaleness" and with "their permanent embrace," wonder at Jadine's "desperate struggle down below to be free, to be something other than they were" (183, TB). Jadine both fears and desires all that Son represents, for she sees that he, like the night women, would grab the person she has worked so hard to become and make her over according to his dreams.

When the two become involved, each thinks of their affair not just as love, but as rescue:

> The rescue was not going well. She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building. He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning *them*, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old (269, TB).

Unfortunately, only Son can make Jadine feel "unorphaned," and only Jadine can give him back his "original, shiny dime." Still, Jadine knows that Son's original dime, the one he is so proud of, is "a piece of currency rooted in gold and humiliation and death," and he knows that loving Jadine means that "the ladies minding the pie table will vanish like shadows under a noon gold sun."

Built on extreme oppositions, their relationship becomes the classic confrontation between the old values of the tribe and the new values of the city, between community and the individual, between nature and culture:

> Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very

> ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands. Mama-spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture-bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing? (269, TB).

The two questions are at the core of the novel. Son is just what his name indicates—an eternal son whose desire it is to remain in a kind of magical, natural state. Jadine is the more "mature" one, but her losses have been big ones. It is clear that she, like the "tar baby" in the folk tale, is the creation of the white man.

In the end Jadine returns to Paris without Son. Morrison indicates that she will continue tangling with the night women and that she will have "no more dreams of safety." As Jadine's plane flies over a rain forest, the narrator tells us "single-minded soldier ants" march straight ahead and the queen "begins her journey searching for a suitable place to build her kingdom." Jadine realizes she is herself the "safety she longed for," but Morrison does not sugarcoat Jadine's escape or let us believe for a moment that her decision is a painless one: "It would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star" (292, TB).

Son's epiphanic moment occurs when he sees a little island girl in an American-made wig "the color of dried blood" and recognizes that he "had it straight before: the pie ladies and the six-string banjo." At the end of the novel, Son is shown running in the hills, where it is said that naked men gallop like angels:

> The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split (306, TB).

Back in the briar patch at last, Son is like the clever rabbit in the tale who lickety-splits away from the tar baby and the mean white farmer singing, "This is where I was born and bred at."

The ending of *Tar Baby* opens up more than it closes off. Will Jadine ever get away from the night women? And is her freedom rendered meaningless if it comes at the cost of dreaming? Is Son really free if his life is confined to the briar patch? Morrison uses the thwarted love between Son and Jadine to illuminate the tragic losses which result from an Either/Or world view and from the demand for victory and hierarchy over unity and compromise.

In *Tar Baby*, as in her earlier novels, Morrison shuns simple answers to complex questions and demonstrates consistently, and with deep sorrow, that in this world "love" is never simple and is never enough. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison's narrator tells us,

> Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly . . . (159, BE).

Thus, to Alice's question in *Through the Looking Glass* about "whether you can make words mean so many things," Morrison's work stands as an emphatic affirmative response. Toni Morrison would have us see that words *mean* many things and that names *do* many things; and she would have us understand how individual identities are thwarted, personal histories are buried, and human life is wasted because of inadequate, lying language. Taken together, the novels of Toni Morrison demonstrate the extent to which perception becomes fossilized by language and by simplistic black-and-white thought systems which deny the infinite shades of individual feeling and the full spectrum of human experience. Implicit in Toni Morrison's fiction are a revaluing of the so-called negative sides of the traditional dualisms and a transformation of the hierarchical mentality.

Notes

[1]Stokeley Carmichael at Morgan State College, January 16, 1967, quoted in *Language in America*, Neil Postman, Charles Weingartner, and Terence Moran, eds. (New York: Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1969).

[2]Quotations from Toni Morrison's novels are indicated by page number(s) with the letters BE, S, Song, and TB. Editions cited in this article are: *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970); *Sula* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973); *Song of Solomon* (New York: Signet Books, 1978); and *Tar Baby* (New York: Plume Books, 1982).