Black or White
—— A Thematic Study on Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby

黑白之间
—— 托妮·莫里森《柏油娃》的文化主题解读

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Synopsis

Toni Morrison, a writer “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (Swedish Academy, 1993), is the first African-American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The poetic and magic language and the profound insight into human life have won her a large readership, high reputation and many honors.

Since the publication of her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison has focused her major thematic concerns on black people’s existence, feelings, and experiences of the conflicts of race, gender and class in the racist society, mainly in America. In black history, racism, cultural imperialism and post-colonialism have a debilitating influence on the consciousness of black people in that, on the one hand, black cultural and historical consciousness has been erased or whitened, and on the other hand, it has been kept marginalized and alienated. Therefore, black people fall into the cultural dilemma, in W.E.B. Du Bois’s word, of the conflicting “double consciousness”. And with the incomplete and inauthentic cultural identity, black people have to struggle to find out where to belong to and to seek a sense of identity.

As a black woman writer, Morrison notices how African American people experience their identity crisis living in the contemporary dominant culture. Her works, made to bear witness to what is harassing black people, quest for the answers and solutions to their predicament, identity crisis and identity redefinition. And her use of folklore, enchanted poetic style, and mythic
elements rendered in a realistic manner of depiction of racial, gender and class conflicts gives her stories great strength and texture.

Morrison’s fourth novel, *Tar Baby*, depicts the contemporary identity crisis of African Americans and their struggle over cultural definitions of personal identity in a contemporary world. Set in Paris, in a small island of Isle de Chevaliers in the French Caribbean, in New York and in a black town of Eloee in Florida around the 1970s, the novel centers on the cultural conflicts between the two protagonists Jadine and Son, who are both blacks but stick to different even contradictory cultural beliefs. Unable to bring the two conflicting forms of consciousness into reconciliation, the novel ends with Jadine’ departure from Son. Morrison exposes in the novel that in this contemporary and racist society African Americans are in the danger of being whitened as well as of being stuck in Black Nationalism and racial purism. Therefore, African Americans must negotiate a place for themselves within white-dominated America. The point is how they should situate themselves with respect to their own history and culture while reacting positively and properly to the dominant culture. The novel, however, does not offer any viable resolutions in the end, but with an open ending, Morrison has opened a door of possibilities of solution.

The study of *Tar Baby* in my thesis focuses on the theme of the identity crisis experienced by African Americans, the destructive effect of racism on black identity, and their struggle for an authentic identity. This thesis is divided into three chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction describes Morrison’s status as a writer and narrates the plot and allegorical
implication of the novel. The first chapter uses post-colonial theory and W.E.B.
Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness to analyze the negative impact of
colonization, the dominant ideology and racism on the Blacks. The second
chapter discusses the relationships and conflicts between Jadine and Son and
concludes that both of them fall a victim to the omnipresent mentality that
holds high superiority of white culture. Jadine and Son respectively represent
an extreme result of victimization – being completely whitened or remaining a
black primitive. Caught in the conflicting double consciousness, they are not
able to reach reconcilement and harmony. The third chapter explores the
implicit solution to the crisis and argues that the harmony of the white
consciousness and the black consciousness relies on “dual-consciousness” –
the cultural unity and integration – with which African Americans can
simultaneously embrace two different cultural identities.

Finally, with a summary of the main points of the thesis, the conclusion points
out that Tar Baby successfully fulfills what Toni Morrison expects her works
to do – to bear witness to the plight, dilemma, and struggle of African
Americans, and to inspire all human beings.

**Keywords:** Tar Baby; Toni Morrison; Identity crisis; Double-consciousness;
Cultural integration
中文摘要

托妮·莫里森是第一位被授予诺贝尔文学奖的非裔美国女作家。她的小说以强烈的视觉感和诗性语言生动地再现了美国现实生活的重要一面。她以奇特而富于诗意的语言以及对人性敏锐的洞察力饮誉文坛，并赢得无数奖项以及读者的赞誉。

1970年莫里森发表了第一部小说《最蓝的眼睛》。她的作品主要关注生活在美国种族歧视社会中的黑人以及他们在种族矛盾、性别冲突以及阶级对立环境下的生存、遭遇和情感。在黑人历史上，种族歧视、文化帝国主义和后殖民主义弱化和分裂了黑人意识和属性，表现在：一方面，非裔美国人的文化属性和历史属性被抹杀或白化；另一方面则被边缘化。因此造成文化双重属性的冲突，即杜波伊斯提出的“双重意识”。文化身分属性冲突的非裔美国人需要寻找归属感，重新定义自我身份。

作为非裔美国女作家，莫里森十分关注当代非裔美国人在主流文化和主流社会中身份危机的问题。她的作品，见证了他们的问题，并在探索着答案和对策。她融合民间传说、诗意文风以及神话元素以写实的方式表现出种族、性别、阶级的对立和冲突，使得叙述生动有致。

莫里森的第四部小说《柏油娃》描写了当代非裔美国人的身份危机以及他们在主流社会中确认、定义自我身份的斗争。故事发生在1970年代的巴黎、加勒比小岛（骑士岛）、纽约以及佛罗里达州一黑人小镇埃罗。小说以固守不同文化信念的男女主人公雅丹和森以及他们的冲突为中心。由于文化意识认定不同，二人最终选择不同道路。莫里森在书中揭示非裔美国人在当代种族歧视社会中生存的两种危险：一是白化的危险；二是黑人民
族主义的狭隘性。所以他们必须在白人主流社会里找到自己的位置。问题是如何做到接纳主流文化的同时保有黑人的历史文化。虽然小说结局没有做出回答，但开放式结局打开了无数可能的大门。

本论文以杜波伊斯提出的“双重意识”为依托来分析非裔美国人身份危机、主流文化和种族主义对身份属性的影响以及对完善真实的身份的追求。论文主体部分共三章，以及绪论和结语。导言简要介绍作家莫里森的主要作品和主题关注，小说《柏油娃》的传说寓意和主题内容，并简要介绍了论文的构思、结构和论点。第一章引入杜波伊斯提出的“双重意识”及相关理论，论证白人殖民历史、主流文化和种族歧视对黑人意识的负面影响。第二章通过分析雅丹和森的关系和冲突指出二者都是主流文化霸权主义和种族主义的受害者，分别代表两种典型：完全西化和自我封闭。身分属性的双重性使他们无法妥协并融合。因此在第三章，论文指出身份危机的出路在于双重自我的融合，成为“双合意识”，即通过文化的渗透融合，非裔美国人能够同时融合两种不同的文化身份属性。

关键词：《柏油娃》；托妮·莫里森；身份危机；双重意识；文化融合
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Introduction

1. Toni Morrison the Writer

With eight extraordinary novels and four major literary awards, including the 1988 Pulitzer Prize and the 1993 Nobel Prize, Toni Morrison is in the midst of a more than fulfilling career as a master novelist. Born Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison is the second of four children in a black working-class family that possessed an intense love of black culture and transferred their African-American heritage to younger generations by telling their children folktales of black communities. Since childhood, Morrison has displayed an interest in literature. She studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities and developed an academic career at Texas Southern University, Howard University, and Yale University. She also worked as an editor for Random House, giving numerous and remarkable public lectures on African-American literature. In 1958, she met and married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect. The couple had two sons, but they got divorced in 1964, mainly because neither of them wanted to compromise with each other on cultural differences. In 1965, she became a fiction editor. Between 1984 and 1989, she taught writing at the State University of New York at Albany and then joined the faculty of Princeton University. An editor at Random House for many years, Morrison now teaches fiction writing at Princeton University. Making her debut as a novelist in 1970, Morrison soon gained the attention of both critics and a wide audience with her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged
depictions of Black America.

After her six years of marriage ended, Morrison taught at Howard University and raised her two children alone. Meanwhile, Morrison wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), followed by *Sula* (1973). Then came *Song of Solomon* (1977), which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, *Tar Baby* (1981), the play *Dreaming Emmett* (1985), *Beloved* (1987) that received the Pulitzer in 1988, and *Jazz* (1992). In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Her latest works are *Paradise* (1998) and *Love* (2003). All the works have won her a reputation as a gifted storyteller whose troubled characters seek to find themselves and their cultural riches in a society that warps or impedes such essential growth. Charles Larson comments in the *Chicago Tribune* Book World that each of Morrison's novels “is as original as anything that has appeared in our literature in the last 20 years”. For Larson, the significance of Morrison’s works lies in that “the contemporaneity that unites them — the troubling persistence of racism in America — is infused with an urgency that only a black writer can have about our society”. In her works, Toni Morrison has explored the experience of African Americans, especially of black women, in a racist culture and society. By representing the essential aspects of African-American reality, Morrison tries to reach the truth about how African Americans can negotiate a place for themselves within a dominant culture, how they situate themselves with respect to their own history and culture, and to what degree they should assimilate the dominant culture for survival.
The complexity and richness of Morrison’s novels, their novelistic fancy as well as their historical journey, are embedded in the context of the black experience, more specifically in the context of the black woman’s experience in America. The characters of Morrison’s works are usually traumatized by racism, sexism, and cultural colonization. And one of the pervasive themes of Morrison’s novels is the African American experience of identity crisis under the competing demands of both the white world and the black tradition. Witnessing the crisis, the loss, and the pain of Black people, her novels direct her characters to the struggle of finding themselves and their cultural identity in an unjust racist society through reconnection with black folk culture and heritage.

*The Bluest Eye* is a novel of initiation concerning a victimized adolescent black girl who is obsessed with the white standards of beauty and longs to have blue eyes. The first book of Morrison to reveal the damage of racism and destructive influence of the dominant culture on blacks, the novel advocates that the authentic black identity can be achieved in the rural/ agrarian black community. *Sula* explores the theme of female self identification in the conventional black community by examining the dynamics of friendship between two black women. By contrasting Sula, the anti-conventional feminist, with Nel, a traditional woman, Morrison shows the limitations of both a modern feminist-oriented role and a conventional domestic female role and promotes the self identification of black women through keeping a balance between self individuation and conforming to conventions of the black community. Transferring its focus from female to male, Morrison’s third book,
Song of Solomon, focusing on strong black male characters, is told by a male narrator in search of his identity, who finally finishes his journey from alienation to authenticity, fulfills self-discovery in the rural black community, and finds that the connection with black heritage is the root of his self identification. It’s in the fourth novel that Morrison directly explores the black identity issue through vivid description of the interaction between black and white characters. Set on a Caribbean island, Tar Baby reveals conflicts of race, class, and sex through the multifaceted conflicts between a Europeanized black girl and an African-American man. Confronted with the conflict between two sets of cultures and worldview, the young couple can’t reconcile. Instead of offering a resolution to cultural and sexual conflicts, Morrison questions the black identity that is defined in western culture as well as in a black rural community that centers on patriarchy and exclusionism. Morrison tends to find a way to re-imagine a form of blackness that allows for the individual to survive and develop in the racist society. In later works, Morrison’s concern about self identity has been broadened into contemplation over fate of African Americans and over strength of black collective memory and consciousness. Tar Baby is followed by a trilogy, Beloved, Jazz, and Paradise, which focus on black history and are written primarily from an African American cultural perspective. Both Beloved and Jazz take as their frameworks historically documented events in black lives: Beloved is based on the case of Margaret Garner; Jazz, on a photo taken by James Van Der Zee that appears in The Harlem Book of the Dead. Beloved, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, is based on the true story of a runaway slave who, at the point of recapture, kills her infant daughter in order to spare her a life of
slavery. Morrison uses the story to address a key question for black people then and now: How can we let go of the pain of the past and redeem the sacrifices made in the struggle for freedom? Besides, Morrison uses the black slave experience in America as a metaphor for the trauma of the human condition. Dealing with the conflicting impulses of a black mother’s love under slavery and in freedom, *Beloved* investigates the complexities of love, especially mothers’ love. With a theme of romantic love and jealousy, *Jazz* is a lyrical and haunting novel that opens with the salesman of women's beauty products has shot his teenage lover and his wife has attempted to mutilate the young woman's corpse during the funeral. The novel captures the rhythms of the Harlem in the 1920s and explores the themes of love, obsession, and what happens when love shifts to hatred. Focusing on the relationship between man and woman, the third of the trilogy *Paradise* is a richly detailed portrait of a black community in Oklahoma, which turns out to be a patriarchal community in which men are oppressors and inflict control and violence on women. Although the novel begins in 1976, it covers a period of one hundred years in African American immigrant history, starting from the time the freemen came from the south into Oklahoma territory. The latest novel, *Love*, published in 2003, shows Morrison’s further thematic study of human existence and feelings. The book involves the relationship between Bill Cosey and five women who survive and love him: his granddaughter, his widow, two former employees, and a homeless young girl. Bill, the wealthy owner of a famous hotel and resort, shapes their yearnings for father, husband, lover, guardian, and friend, yearnings that dominate the lives of these women long after his death. However, the man himself is obsessed by secret forces – a troubled past
and a spellbinding woman named Celestial. With this book Morrison makes a further audacious exploration into the meaning of human existence, the nature of love (its sublime possession and its terror), and a profound understanding of how alive the past can be.

As an African-American woman writer, Toni Morrison observes precisely the plight of African Americans in America. Her fiction concerns the erasure of black cultural consciousness and cultural history by the white hegemony as well as the identity crisis of black people. In her novels, the main characters are confronted with the loss of self due to the absence of a complete cultural identity, and they openly grapple with the conflict of two sets of cultures and worldview in order to find out the meaning of their existence in the past, in the present and in the future.

2. Tar Baby

Among all of Morrison’s novels, *Tar Baby* seems an unlikely choice for pre-eminence in the Morrison canon. It is, after all, the least admired and least researched of her novels. It has been called her “most problematic and unresolved novel” (Peterson 471) and has received little critical attention generally, and virtually no critical attention in the past five years. Yet *Tar Baby* seems problematic to many of us precisely because it functions as a transitional text in Morrison's oeuvre. As far as the subject matter and the themes are concerned, Morrison’s works can be roughly divided into two installments. Malin Walther Pereira observes that “Morrison’s complex relationship to colonization is radically transformed from her early to more
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