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Theorising the ambiguous space: The narrative architecture of the dilemma tale as an interpretive frame for reading Morrison’s Beloved

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THEORISING THE AMBIGUOUS SPACE:
THE NARRATIVE ARCHITECTURE OF THE DILEMMA TALE AS AN
INTERPRETIVE FRAME FOR READING MORRISON’S BELOVED

1. INTROIT

We are composed of what we remember, and our imaginative writers are key in this. An aspect of this humanising enterprise is the return of these writers to “inherited poetics”, the traditions of orality. For, by returning us to the virtues and mnemonics of orality, and thereby mixing these with chirographic practices, modern writers enable us to rethink not only our identity, but the dynamics of culture and of chirography as a visual and value-laden medium; they also help us to examine fundamental shifts in knowledge and language in our multicultural, gendered and post-colonial world. But for African American imaginative writers, particularly those of fiction, the creative appropriation of the oral tradition goes beyond “simply an ideological incorporation that returns the narrative to indigenous modes of imaginative expression and aesthetics” (Wilson-Tagoe 1999:158). According to Maureen Warner-Lewis “scribal artists and musical composers” have resorted to oral traditions for two reasons: firstly “out of cultural nationalism – the need to ground their conceptions and representations in ‘the thought, word, and deed’ of a particular people”, and secondly, “to project and mine the resources of inherited poetics” (2004:131). This places oral traditions somewhat in transition because it involves the relocating of the ontology and pedagogy of oral cultures into chirographic space, thus engendering a dialogic process whose end can only be mutually beneficent.

Writers of African descent have been rigorously engaged in various possibilities that permit the activation of “the resources of inherited poetics” which encapsulate cultural views of space, time and reality as a means of confronting the challenges of the whole imperialist project of writing, theory, history and colonialism. The overall goal is to articulate new possibilities and opportunities for understanding the future while at the same time showing how the past frames our experience. Abiola and Gikandi have noted that:
the development in which the European languages began to be employed effectively as means of the expression of African response to the historical, social and cultural implications of the colonial dispensation, for the representation of indigenous modes of life and the articulation of a new sense of identity derived from the traditional folkways and heritage of cultural values (2004: xii).

Because imperialism and its concomitant colonialism frame the vast experiences of Africans and African Americans, the writing of fiction, for these people, has a liberational aspect to it. Though it may sound tendentious, the truth is that art for art sake is often considered a literary, cultural and socio-political luxury they can not engage in. The quest for identity was and still is a paramount motif in the literature of African Americans. To achieve this objective necessitates the deliberate subversion and interrogation of hegemonic or colonial discourse. Central to interrogating the master narrative is the adoption and deployment of narrative techniques that carry the burden of the writer’s aesthetic and ideological import. As Wayne C. Booth has pointedly argued, “a writer’s choice of devices and compositional strategies is from the beginning a choice of ethos, an invitation to one kind of criticism” (qtd in Axel Nissen: 1). Therefore part of the attempt to appreciate what a writer seeks to do can be grasped by paying attention to the narrative techniques deployed in the text. It is in this context that the novels of Toni Morrison become relevant.

According to Berkhofer, “The notion of hegemony holds that dominant social and political arrangements generate conceptual structures to warrant those arrangements and their intellectual offspring as “natural,” even inevitable, to many or most persons in society” (1995:211). This includes the “power to establish authoritative definitions of social situations and social needs, the power to define the universe of legitimate disagreement, and the power to shape the political agenda. …it expresses the advantaged position of dominant social groups with respect to discourse” (Nancy Frazer, in Berkhofer 1995: 211). In other words, hegemonic discourse narrows the angle of reality to an arbitrarily chosen viewpoint that is consciously masqueraded in various forms for ideological purposes. The danger about hegemonic discourse is that it excludes others and therefore simplifies the complexity of reality. Hegemonic discourse must be interrogated because left unchallenged it “becomes the successful representation of a representation, of any representation as real -- as the only possible representation” (Jon Stratton, 1990:320).

In literature hegemonic discourse is closely associated with univocal narrative, the voice that rejects the Other; it is discourse that totalizes or essentialises reality. Such a notion of reality does not make space for the subjugated because it thrives on Schoolteacher’s thesis in Morison’s Beloved that “…definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined” (p.190). The larger task of the African American writer therefore is first the recognition of this power of the hegemonic discourse, and secondly the deliberate reconstitution of the experiences of their people.

When the African and African American, “the defined”, decided to write, it was to show that the time had come for “the defined” to define himself or herself. In his well known collection of essays, Home and Exile, the African writer Chinua Achebe explains that he began to question the “innocence of stories” after reading Heart of Darkness and Mister Johnson:
There is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like. …that although fiction was undoubtedly fictitious it could also be true or false, not with the truth or falsehood of a news item but as to its disinterestedness, its intention, its integrity… (2000: 24).

It is this same recognition of the power of hegemonic narrative, particularly literature, that provoked Morrison into undertaking an “investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike, (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (1992:6). The novel then, perhaps more than any other genre, has become the site for articulating the experiences of the African and the African American, and also for contesting the distorted history and experiences of these people. To overcome narrative invisibility and rejection it is necessary, to borrow the words of Edward Said, that “narrative…introduces an opposing point of view, perspective, consciousness to the unitary web of vision” (1978:240).

The view that narrative can be challenged has seen the emergence of critical theoretical works and novels by Africans and African Americans that seek to contextualise the aesthetic and hermeneutical reading of their literature in the oral tradition. One major objective of this quest for indigenous or autonomous frameworks is not only “to reclaim voices” but also to “contextualise” them, and to “reconstitute the ‘discursive’ world which the subjects inhabited and were shaped by” (Pierson, 1991: 94).

Part of the concern of this essay is to show how a particular African mode of “cultural processes”, the dilemma tale type, can help illuminate our understanding of the narrative techniques of Morrison. This is because in her novels this writer does not merely create another worldview; she articulates a cosmology that springs from her own specific, African cultural background.

Morrison’s major concern is to move African Americans from the periphery, as dismissive others, to a centre where their experiences can be articulated and elaborated. This requires the deployment of textual strategies that both empower her characters and at the same time interrogate the ontological and epistemological foundations upon which the whole colonial and racial project of invisibility and otherness is built. This essay argues that the dilemma tale type, by its purpose, narrative technique and thematic provides a definable literary space for addressing and interrogating the master narrative.

II: MORRISON AND THE USES OF ORALITY

A lot has been written on the literacy/orality interface in the narratives of Morrison. Yet, despite the volumes that have been written on the influence of the oral tradition on her works, an in-depth study of how the dilemma tale type may serve as an interpretive frame for explicating her narrative strategies and what statements these make within the larger context of postcolonial theory and history, is lacking.

Morrison fictional worlds normally inhabit a geographic space separate and different from the typically African cultural milieu in which the dilemma tale type is set, but she makes direct claims to the oral environment in which the folktale exists and originated from as part of her heritage. Several critics have drawn attention to her conscious tendency to challenge the received history/narrative and to articulate
an alternative perspective. As a result she writes historical novels that perform an archaeological function; she uses the novel to interrogate the received history as a way of illuminating and apprehending the present and shaping a clear vision for the future.

On several occasions Morrison has sought to emphasize, justify and clarify her position on the subject of history. In an interview with Christiana Davis she says:

[T]he reclamation of the history of black people … is paramount in its importance because while you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There is a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many ways and the job of recovery is ours. It is a serious responsibility (1988:46)

Over time, in her writings and interviews, she has developed and articulated her own theories of art that are grounded in the oral traditions of Africa and African Americans. However, in contextualizing our analysis in the dilemma tale type and appropriating the narrative characteristics inherent in it, our emphasis is not on a quest for a pan African aesthetic, but the identification and appropriation of an interpretive frame or context that we think provides new or alternative insight into reading her novels.

Postcolonial theory provides the broader conceptual context for our discussion. Ashcroft et al. have argued that postcolonial literary theory emerged from the inability of European theory to deal adequately with the complexities and varied cultural provenance of postcolonial writing. Although the concerns of postcolonial theory have proliferated as theorists emerge, one can delineate two fundamental tenets that underpin the writings of both postcolonial critics and theorists: firstly, that the colonized subject is either unrepresented or misrepresented in the literature of the colonial culture. By misrepresentation, reference is made to the distortion of the experiences, realities and inscription of inferiority of the colonized. Hence the literature of the colonized people attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past in the face of that past’s inevitable otherness.

The other characteristic of postcolonial literary theory that is central to our focus is its recognition of the interaction of the English language and the older traditions of orature or literature in postcolonial societies. Ashcroft et al. have made the important observation that:

African literatures, as a result of their interface with traditional oral narratives, have offered a number of alter/native ways of conceiving narrative structure. They have influenced both the structure and features of ‘novels’ produced in English in that continent and insisted on the inclusion of many forms of performance in any effective cross-cultural discussion of the structure and form of narrative (1989:179).

It is this recognition by postcolonial theorists of the incorporation and adaptation of traditional forms of imaginative expression by certain African and African American writers that is relevant to our thesis that the dilemma tale type provides potential interpretive sites for reading Toni Morrison’s narrative techniques, particularly in Beloved. The methodology we have adopted is first, the identification of the characteristics of the dilemma tale and secondly, showing, through focusing on key passages, how these are appropriated in Morrison’s novel to challenge the master narrative and to address postcolonial and contemporary issues that confront African American people.
A substantial number of critics have addressed Toni Morrison’s narrative and rhetorical strategies in *Beloved* from various perspectives: feminist, new historicism, deconstruction, reader response, psychoanalytic, cinematic and postmodernist. The influence of the oral traditions of Africa and Africa America in her writing, particularly of folktale types and aspects of West African metaphysics, has also been variously examined (Vashti, 1987; Wilentz, 1997; Davies, 1994; Jesser, 1999; Dathorne, 2001 and Okonkwo, 2004). Morrison herself has consistently and persistently drawn attention to her deliberate and conscious appropriation and incorporation of indigenous African and African American oral traditions in her work. Perhaps nowhere is this more forcefully articulated than in “Memory, Creation and Writing”, where Morrison writes:

I wanted simply to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably black, not because its characters were black, or because I was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credential those recognized and verifiable principles of Black art (1984: 385-390).

One may be tempted to ask what these “recognizable and verifiable principles of Black art” are. But Morrison provides the answer.

If my work is faithfully to reflect the aesthetic tradition of Afro-American culture, it must make conscious use of the characteristics of its art forms and translate them into print: antiphony, the group nature of art, its functionality, its improvisational nature, its relationship to audience, its relationship to audience performance, its critical voice which upholds tradition and communal values… (Memory, 1984: 388-389).

It is clear from a survey of the literature that reading Morrison’s novels in the context of the oral tradition is not new. What may be new here is that the focus is on how the structure, purpose and thematic preoccupation of the dilemma tale can illuminate our understanding of narrative technique in *Beloved*.

### III. THE DILEMMA TALE AS AN INTERPRETIVE SPACE

Oral stories and their manner of telling have been used by many cultures to stimulate questions, to raise issues, to excite debate, to set moral boundaries, and to offer listeners a view of life as it should be. While many stories tend to support and confirm our perceptions of the world, a few others, such as the dilemma tale, may contradict, expand, theorize on or even confuse our worldviews. An analysis of the transformative, pedagogical and epistemological functions of the dilemma tale type may explain it as a challenge to the monopoly of monolithic interpretation. The point is that the dilemma tale as an interpretive frame is not the preserve of any one source, whether god or human, despite what Gates, for example, has claimed for the trickster Eshu as the reader of hidden meanings in *The Signifying Monkey*. Rather, the dilemma tale is to be seen as a site in which autopoiesis and self-creation are not only theorized but demonstrably realized. What happens in the dilemma tale is that there is a simultaneous freeing of voices and the
creation of multiple perspectives, out of which emerges a veritable marketplace of ideas, all jostling for
space.

Dilemma tales constitute a large, diverse and widespread class of folktales specific to West Africa. (Bascom 1975; Yankah 2004). These are prose narratives that leave the listeners with a choice among alternatives, such as which of several characters has done the best, deserves a reward, or should win an argument or a case in court (Bascom:1975).

Structurally, the narrative architecture of dilemma tales can be divided into two basic levels. The first level of narration deals with the tale proper or the adventure, and the narrator of the tale tells it while the audience listens. All the important episodes of the hero’s adventure are related at this level and are done in such a manner as to help the audience understand the sequence of events, what really happened, how and why they happened. The adventure in this first level of narration may raise complex ethical, legal and moral issues about the characters’ actions and choices, and the listeners will have to contemplate these. The narrator ends the tale with a dilemma often stated as a question to be debated by the audience. This first level of the narrative architecture of dilemma tales is structured to “prompt an audience to participate, express a vested interest in the outcome, engage in debate and logical reasoning, construct arguments and judgments, and in the process witness itself as acting in a unified community” (Valorie D. Thomas, 2000:42).

Structurally, therefore, the end of the tale is, in fact, not the end of the dilemma tale. Rather, it is the inauguration of a spirited debate or discussion. As Mengrelis Thanos rightly observes “The end is not quite...an end. The adventure is finished but it is the audience that gives the conclusion. The end is an enigma to resolve” (qtd.in Bascom, 1975). It is the nature of the issues involved -- moral, legal or ethical -- that distinguishes dilemma tales from those with similar questions, not the ending question. Dilemma tales are therefore tales without closure that pose a problem, or a series of problems, ranging from questions of physical or magical skills to questions of an ethical or moral nature. They often appear ambiguous. Here we may find its potential as a counter discourse to closure.

The second narrative level is technically initiated by the question posed by the narrator. Here the narrator’s voice recedes and the audience’s voices take the centre stage. What the participants actually do at this stage is that they deconstruct the tale in order to construct meaning. Two discrete chronological blocks may therefore be defined within and around the dilemma tale: there is a movement from the time of the events of the tale, the time in the near or distant past when the events in the first level of narration occurred, to the present moment in which the narrator tells the events of the tale. Because it involves the many voices of the audience, this second level of narration incorporates multiple points of view or perspectives. This has implications for reading and interpretation. It shows that meaning is achieved in the interplay of the author and the active involvement of the reader. In other words, meaning is not a product that is given but a process to be engaged in.

The interrogative formula at the end of the dilemma tale proper is a technique that allows the teller of the tale to draw on the voice of the community. The result is the creation of a ‘conflictual’ narrative community. This narrative situation provides the springboard for the ‘owner’ or teller of the tale, the ex-
tended narrators or direct participants, the listeners and the community to interrogate the ‘master narrative’. The literary and interpretive value of this worldview of the dilemma tale is that it develops in participants and the community alike the virtue that the angle of vision is not always unitary but divergent. This accounts for the humanistic function of the dilemma tale. The various interpretations may carry moral and ethical value, in the sense that they help the participants and the entire community to cope with the world around them and improve their understanding. It teaches them that the world is a complex place full of problematic situations that defy authoritative responses. Thus the dilemma tale conveys to the community a meaningful ‘truth’ of many truths, one that enables the community to go back to the world with a reordered experience which will enable them manage better and confront the vicissitudes of life more fully.

Dilemma tales performed several functions in traditional society: they were intellectual puzzles that sharpened the verbal wits of participants and audience; they taught the skills of argumentation and debate; they promoted discussions and they were a literary form or artistic tool for interrogating forcefully the human dilemma or conflicting moral values. In fact, dilemma stories were an integral part of moral and ethical training in many African societies (Bascom, 1975). But more than that, dilemma tales were meant to demonstrate that in human affairs there are often no totalizing narratives and answers but only difficult choices that call into play multiple conflicting moral values. In other words, dilemma tales raised philosophical, moral and ethical questions that revealed that there are some situations that defy quick solutions and slick answers and in which opinions will diverge. Listeners of dilemma tales therefore ponder what is just or unjust, what is feeble or courageous, what is ethical or invidious, and what is sensible or ridiculous (Courlander, 1975). Then they make their choices, fully aware of the lack of fullness of those choices. Dilemma tales then can be said to be an invitation to contemplation and debate, a way to illustrate life’s complex composition, and therefore its careful richness. We can describe them as “teaching stories”, which Kirkwood defines as brief, oral narratives told primarily to instruct, guide or influence listeners, rather than pointlessly entertain.

However, when we begin to view dilemma stories as literary products it becomes clear that they also theorize on the nature of reading or interpretation, particularly regarding the active participation of the reader or listener in the meaning-making process. This is the angle from which we are examining the dilemma tale type in relation to Morrison’s Beloved.

Several characteristics of dilemma stories make them potential sites for understanding the narrative techniques of Morrison novels. An essential characteristic of the dilemma tale is that it leaves the audience with a choice among alternatives. The complexity of society makes it sometimes irrational to pass judgment with certitude. There are few absolutes. Society thrives on the recognition and acceptance that multiple points of view offer insight or as the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche admonishes, “many eyes will tell us more than one.” Dilemma tales by their very nature are a challenge to master narratives or hegemonic discourse, if only because they privilege multiple perspectives. Such a worldview is important for reading the novel as a genre in African and African American literary discourse.
Okpewho explains that the dilemma tale does not give a firm moral lesson. Rather it leaves the moral to be interpreted by the audience. The purpose of this narrative quality of the dilemma tale is not simply to tell the audience what the tale means but rather to offer them a contemplative space to debate the issues raised and solve the dilemma on their own. As a result many different viewpoints are given throughout the tale, and as such the dilemma tale type can be described as process or motion, not arrival. It is a theatre that provides a useful arena for previously unheard of actors to present their varied voices and gestures. Such a narrative space is a challenge to a unitary viewpoint. As a literary space or arena, the dilemma tale privileges the representation of multiple points of view and voice.

Another important characteristic of dilemma stories, a concomitant of the first characteristic noted above, is that because dilemma stories have no formal closure, they necessarily have ambiguous endings. Morrison herself has said:

You don’t end a story in the oral tradition…You can have the little message at the end, your little moral, but the ambiguity is deliberate because it doesn’t end. It’s an ongoing thing and the reader or the listener is in it and you have to THINK (Gates and Appiah 1984:412-420).

In addition, the dilemma tale is important as an interpretive paradigm because it serves both as a structural and rhetorical device. As a structural device it allows for the organization of the narrative around a defined moral or ethical issue. On the other hand, as a rhetorical device it presents the stage for forcefully promoting or articulating alternative code of ethics or system of ideas that run counter to and sometimes even displace the prevailing code of ethics and concepts.

Finally, another characteristic of the dilemma tale is that it interrogates meaning and interpretation. The fundamental question that is foregrounded in the problematic of interpretation is ‘what are the politics of interpretation and how are politics embedded in interpretation?’ Like the dilemma tale, Morrison tries to answer these questions through the deployment of multiple points of view as a narrative technique. Dilemma stories provide the narrative context for multiplicity of meaning or interpretation but not infinity of meaning or interpretation. As the participants engage in the debate provoked by the question posed at the end of the dilemma tale, they do so with the recognition that their interpretations would be acceptable for consideration only as they fall within the specific cultural epistemology that the narrator has made available in the tale.

As an African American working within the larger context of postcolonial discourse where the issues of how experience shapes knowledge, identity and community are dominant theoretical and epistemological debates, the focus on the complexity of interpretation becomes a powerful ideological and literary tool in Morrison’s hands. By focusing on interpretation and its concomitant multiple points of view, modern Black African and African American writers, like the community of tellers and participants of the dilemma tale, raise the cardinal questions of who speaks, and for whom? From what and whose viewpoint? For what and whose purposes? In all of these the thematic concerns of the dilemma tale also make it a veritable space for engaging contemporary issues such as the ambivalent legacy of colonialism, domination and slavery.
IV: **BELOVED: SETHE’S CHOICE**

So far we have examined the dilemma tale and identified some of its characteristics: the dilemma or ethical choice that confronts the main character, the use of multiple points of view or perspectives, the problematic of interpretation, and the ambiguous ending. In this section we shall examine how these characteristics manifest as narrative technique in Morrison’s *Beloved*. Our focus on narrative technique and the methodology we have adopted for our analysis have two advantages: first, it is meant to show how a re-reading of this novel in the context of the dilemma tale provides insight into understanding the complexity of the issues and worldview Morrison deals with and articulates in her fiction. We shall argue that by thematizing the problematic of choice, for example, Morrison is able to forcefully foreground the theme of tradition and change, which is a dominant issue she deals with in the novel.

At the core of *Beloved* is an unspeakable act, at once horrific and heroic, in which Sethe, a mother and an escaped slave, kills her infant daughter rather than allow her to be taken into chattel slavery. The narrative traces the journey of Sethe from slavery to freedom during and immediately after the Civil War, and that story is ultimately framed as a dilemma tale. An important narrative technique of the dilemma tale that manifests in Morrison’s *Beloved* is that events are organized around an incisively defined dilemma that confronts the main character, Sethe. This is so because, for Morrison, history has imposed on the African American difficult choices between bad alternatives. By this technique Morrison explores the complexity of the daily choices that institutional slavery imposes on the slave. All the events in the novel—past and present—are organized around Sethe’s dilemma. In fact, the problematic of choice that slavery imposed on slaves is the fulcrum on which the novel is poised. Everything leads directly to it or stems indirectly from it. Consequently, almost every character in the novel is at one point or the other confronted with the problematic of choice.

The rising order of events in *Beloved* climaxes with Sethe’s choice of death over life on her children’s behalf. When this newly-escaped slave-mother saw the slave catchers approach, she proceeded to kill her children to prevent their capture into slavery. Poised in the pitiless vacancy of chattel slavery – between life as slavery and death as freedom – was she right or as she wrong to want to kill her children? Even if it was the right choice, had she the right to make it? Such a condition where the protagonist must make a choice between disagreeable alternatives in full emotional and intellectual view of the moral and ethical issues at stake, as we have argued, is a defining quality of the dilemma tale type.

The ethical issue that Morrison foregrounds in *Beloved* is located in Sethe’s ‘rough choice’, that is, her decision to murder her daughter rather than allow her to become a slave on the plantation at Sweet Home. Around this incident, Morrison builds a haunting and complex tapestry of events that culminate in the horrible act of a mother killing her own child. Because Morrison makes it impossible for the reader to either accept or condemn in totality Sethe’s action, she throws the ethical burden on the reader by requesting the reader to project what s/he would have done if s/he had been confronted with Sethe’s situation. The
dilemma is forcefully conveyed in the dialogue between Sethe and Paul D in which Sethe tries to explain why she killed Beloved. This dialogue is crucial for its ability to foreground the reader’s dilemma:

“I stopped him,” she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe.”

“You love is too thick,” he said…

“Too thick?” she said, thinking of the Clearing where Baby Suggs commands knocked the pods off horse chestnuts. “Love is or ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all.”

“Yeah. It didn’t work, did it? Did it work?” he asked.

“It worked,” she said.

“How? Your boys gone you don’t know where. One girl dead, the other won’t leave the yard. How did it work?”

“They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em.”

“May be there is worse.”

“It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and keep them from what I know is terrible. I did that.”

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”

“There could have been a way. Some other way.”

“What way?” (Pp.164-165)

When Sethe, in full view of her dilemma and personal agony, asks: “what way?” she is posing to Paul D and her unseen reading audience the negative alternatives, the choiceless choice, that end the first level of all dilemma tales. The dilemma raises moral and ethical issues about the burden of slavery, the nature and quality of humanity itself; it questions the boundaries of murder even as it tests the limits of the murdering mother’s love for her child. In the middle of it all is a paradox about love. Can killing one’s own be justified on any grounds as an expression of love? Sethe’s dilemma, according to Wilfred and Clenora, is the result of paradoxical definition of motherhood under slavery which requires that one be “good enough, alert enough, strong enough” (p.108) and at the same time one should “stay alive just that much longer” (ibid). Wilfred and Clenora rightly note that Sethe’s dilemma:

emerges essentially from the diametrically opposing views of relationship that the system of slavery demanded and fostered, one grounded in separation of families, and one—sacred to Sethe—grounded in a sense of correctness (p.108).

But beyond this, there existed another contradiction that the institution of slavery foisted on slaves like Sethe: that the sanity of slaves was essentially limited to how far they promoted the welfare and economic wellbeing of their masters. Any other action or motive that sought to demonstrate either explicitly or implicitly concern for themselves and their children was seen as an indirect recognition by the slave of the inhumanity of the system. This was seen as dangerous and was to be exterminated before it wreaked havoc on the system. This was the delicate balance every slave had to successfully strike. This is why the dilemma that frames Sethe is at once a powerful one in its conception and tragic in its consequence. It is difficult to ignore the moral force of two important arguments in the novel that frame Sethe brutal act. The first is focalized through Baby Suggs

It made sense for a lot of reasons because in all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized (p.23)
The second is Sethe’s:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself any-more. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own…Whites might dirty her all right but not her best thing … (p. 251)

Like the dilemma story where the issue of dilemma is essential, so is any interpretation of Beloved contingent on understanding the structural, thematic, and rhetorical significance of Sethe’s dilemma. As James Phelan rightly observes, Sethe’s decision to murder her children is the most important event in Beloved “not only because the temporal, psychological, structural and thematic logic of the novel flows from that event but also because Morrison’s treatment of it presents her audience with a difficult and unusual ethical problem.”

This interrogation of the dilemma of the African Americans regarding what to make of their historical legacy is not limited to Toni Morrison’s novels alone. In fact, it has nearly attained the status of a trope that is repeated and revised in many ways and forms by African American novelists and dramatists. It is a way for the writer with a historical sense to metaphorize the history of enslavement. August Wilson, for example, is one playwright who has poignantly interrogated this dilemma in his Pulitzer award winning play The Piano Lesson (1990). At the core of this play is what Boy Willie and Berniece Charles want to make of the ornately carved upright piano, which is the Charles’ family’s, prized and hard won possession.

The real dilemma for African Americans, as August Wilson’s play dramatizes, is how to strike a balance between maintaining symbols of the past and appropriating the opportunities of the present for a stake in the future. As in the dilemma tale the question of choice and interpretation is foregrounded in Wilson’s.

Toni Morrison makes extensive use of the technique of multiple points of view in Beloved. This text discloses a variety of perspectives—race, gender, class, historical experience — that reconstitutes the experiences and subjectivities of the characters. In fact, it is impossible to read this novel without being drawn to the multiplicity of perspectives or opinions that the reader is called upon to critically examine. The narrator in this novel is concerned with how history has affected and influenced her characters. This is why in Beloved little space is devoted to the murders per se. Rather the focus of the narrative is to reveal the causes and motivations behind Sethe’s murder. It is this that accounts for characters of successive generations and experiences that are called on the historical stage to give varied interpretations of Sethe’s murder of her daughter. The murder in the novel therefore is a pretext that allows for the interrogation and re-constitution of history and there is no better way to study this than taking a critical look at the various perspectives in the texts.

In Beloved this technique operates at two levels: the telling of Sethe’s rough choice and its motivation, and the identity of the eponymous character, Beloved. At the core of the novel is Sethe’s infanticide. The story of what really happened is told gradually from three different perspectives with each challenging, exposing and clarifying the limitations of those that preceded it. This fits our description of the novel as a dilemma tale that revolves around a moral debate.
In *Beloved* the technique of multiple perspectives is enabled through the reader’s construction of arguments and judgments; in the process they witness themselves acting as a unified community. This is a very important characteristic of the dilemma tale form. This function of the reader is the result of the author’s deliberate inscription of the technique of multiple points of view which co-opts the reader into the active process of meaning-making as a communal enterprise. Therefore the actualization of the dilemma tale provides an ideal community space for the contemplation of such issues as conflicts of loyalty, the necessity of choosing a just response to a difficult situation, and the question of where to lay blame when several parties seem equally guilty. Under such a community space, where the necessity of choice is problematized, interpretation shifts as multiple viewpoints blend and clash to resolve the dilemma. Morrison makes complex and extensive use of this technique. Part of the fascinating quality of *Beloved* is that it revolves around the narrators’ manipulation of viewpoints or perspectives. The multiplicity of interpretations is itself predicated on the problematic of choice or moral debate that is at the core of dilemma stories.

A reading of *Beloved* also shows that the eponymous character Beloved is open to multiple interpretations regarding her identity: a ghost, a refugee from a slave ship, or a woman escaping from incidents of rape. This inchoate and fluid nature of her identity should be viewed as an extension of the interplay of the human and the supernatural, the natural and the spiritual and the blurring of the limitations of matter, time and space that is characteristic of West African cultural conceptions of reality, space and time. As Awoonor observes, this synthesis of the various dimensions of existence is an expression of:

a concern with a fundamental process of integration and survival, integration as opposed to a dichotomized process of evil and good, beautiful and ugly (…) opposed to (…) an itemised, concern, a fragmentation and, therefore, to the destructive absolutism of a one-dimensional totality (1973-74:665).

It is also clear that there is a subtle dialogic or interpretive opposition underlying the various perspectives in *Beloved* on Beloved’s ‘rough choice’. Each perspective responds either directly or indirectly to the perspective of other characters. This is a salient feature of the struggle over meaning and interpretation that dilemma tales engender. It is worth noting that the various perspectives on Sethe’s brutal act are arranged in a manner that not only complicates the reader’s interpretation of the issues but more importantly they are meant to challenge and even clarify the inadequacy of a previous angle of vision. It is in this way that the questions ‘who speaks, for whom, for what purpose and from what point of view? are of supreme importance in any discussion of the narrative technique of *Beloved*. Thus the politics of interpretation is very much presented through the deployment of the technique of multiple perspectives.

Morrison’s interrogation of the neutrality of memory through the multiple perspective technique should be viewed as a struggle against a view of history as objective and scientific. At the same time this interrogative procedure invokes the Akan Sankofa symbol which theorises on the past and the present. The Sankofa symbol is represented by a bird holding an egg in its beak with the head looking backwards. On the face of it the egg represents history and its fragility; it is impossible to recover the past in its wholeness once it drops and spills open. But at a deeper level, the Sankofa symbol draws attention to the complex relationship between the present and the past. Like the bird that is looking into the past, we are reminded that
studying the past, making a narrative of it, is always a purposeful act. The past as we know it exists only as we create it; it cannot be achieved without human agency, without the human stain. This is where its fragility lies. Because historical knowledge is always purposive, it is ruled by motive and wish, a choice of one way, one interpretation, one possibility, out of many. This makes history a gesture towards the future, a reconceptualisation of the past with an eye on the present and the future. Similarly the whole purpose of the dilemma story is a gesture towards the future. The future towards which the narrative in Beloved gestures lies in Sethe and Paul D putting their stories side by side because, as Paul D tells Sethe “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody else. We need some kind of tomorrow” (p.273).

By adopting this complex narrative technique, Morrison co-opts the reader into both the creative process and the more complex interpretive exercise. This is because she deliberately makes it difficult, through the continuous shifting points of views, for the reader to re-establish the logical sequence of events and to comprehend the action in a chronological order. It is only towards the end that the reader gains some insight into the problematic questions of how and why. By employing this shifting or multiple points of view Morrison denies the fidelity of a singular imperial voice.

The final characteristic of dilemma story that may be relevant to the discussion of narrative technique in Beloved is its open-endedness. A reading of Beloved shows that this narrative, like the dilemma story, leaves its conclusion systematically indeterminate and marked by the implicit and explicit interrogative “what to do?” In other words as part of Morrison’s engagement of the reader beyond the text there is no resolution in the strict sense of the word. The narrator denies the reader the comfort of that sense of closure which is characteristic of traditional teleological narratives, and fundamental questions are left unanswered.

By leaving the narrative open, Morrison signals her recognition that there are limitless possibilities in the attempt to look at the history of her people. This allows the author, like the “Okyeame” in Akan courtly tradition, to foreground important historical experiences for the meditation of the reader. Also, the structuring of the narratives around both implicit and explicit dilemmas enables Morrison to undertake the task of (re)placing Africans at the centre of their own narrative. By deliberately and carefully giving African Americans voice, Morrison reconstitutes them as agents and not mere subjects, and narrative technique in Morrison’s Beloved therefore becomes an instrument of resistance against an imposed silence and invisibility.

WORKS CITED


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