

## Comic Sense of Toni Morrison in Her Early Novels

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Humor does not travel very far because its basic stuff is the shared life experience. Time, locale, nationality, and the particular ethnic group to which one belongs often determine what one thinks humorous. Thus, we fail to get the joke most of the time while we read the Laputa episode of *Gulliver's Travels* because we do not know the contemporary issues of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century England at which Swift is poking fun.

On the other hand, there are certain literary works that are almost always able to tickle us because they astutely utilize strategies that work even when we know nothing about the historical context in which they are initially placed. Even a cursory look at the opening passages of Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit* tells us why they are droll to anybody anytime. There, the family history of the Chuzzlewitts is pompously told in a few pages. But, in hindsight, we learn the gist of the passage can be told in a dozen words — that is, every family has several criminals at some points of its history. These early passages are, we belatedly realize, the laboring of the obvious. Yet Dickens gives us this piece of banality in his extremely labored, inflated, and pretentious style and his readers find this incongruity between context and expression irresistibly funny. This approach of his is a sure-fire strategy to provoke the laughter of his audience and his opening joke warms them up to what he has to tell them in the subsequent pages — a somewhat sordid story which only hypocrites and swindlers dominate and in which good men are hard to find.

In order to communicate the sense of the ludicrous to their readers, then, authors can rely on a time-honored tradition of humor and they can also divert from it by using methods conditioned by their individual temperaments. Then, what if such authors are African-American, and what are the characteristics of African-American sense of humor?

From the very first, African-American literature abounds in laughter. William Wells Brown, the first black novelist to have his work published in America, is not without moments to indulge in humor even in his anti-slavery novel, *Clotel, or The President's Daughter* which tells its readers about the tragic fate of Thomas Jefferson's mulatto children. In this novel, comic reliefs are mainly realized through the depiction of personal idiosyncracies of characters, be them black slaves, poor whites or the northern teetotalers. Brown's humor, however, jars against the sentimentality of the main plot — the main plot being a clumsy imitation of popular white novels of the antebellum South. The saccharine-sweet tone of the main plot and the occasional comic never really mix up throughout the course of the action of the novel.

Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker The Berry*. . . is a pioneering novel on the intra-racial color prejudice existing in black communities. Thurman, a satirist, makes sardonic laughter as his chief weapon of attack on the subject. The protagonist Emma Lou Morgan is a very dark-skinned girl born into a family furiously proud of their lightness of complexion. Fleeing from her color-struck family, Emma Lou first goes to Los Angeles and then to Harlem, only to find that most black communities are plagued with such prejudice and that a dark-skinned girl is discriminated against in university life, in housing, in job openings, and even in mating.

Through exaggerating the character traits, Thurman makes his point — the whole idea of associating superiority with light-skin and inferiority with dark-skin is groundless and absurd. The trouble with Emma Lou is that the cult of the color of the skin is so thoroughly inculcated into her that she makes the very prejudice which persecutes her as the sole basis of her judgement of the value of people, so she is never able to come to terms with her own blackness and accordingly is never able to find her place in communities. Full of self-pity, she cannot have a proper self-esteem — thus, victimization, the author implies, is chiefly, if not solely, of her own making.

Consequently, Thurman's exposure of Emma Lou herself is as unsparing as that of anybody (except, perhaps, Alva, her cool self-seeker of the lover) in this novel who is likewise color-conscious :

She [Emma Lou] wasn't the only person who regretted her darkness either. It was an acquired family characteristic, this moaning and grieving over the color of her skin. Everything possible had been done to alleviate the unhappy condition, every suggested agent had been employed, but her skin, despite bleachings, scourgings, and powderings, had remained black — fast black — as nature had planned and effected.<sup>(1)</sup>

Thurman thus presents most of his characters as ludicrous to the point of the ridiculous and the result is that his tone is sometimes too stringent for comfort — and anyway, he explains too much, instead of letting the scenes imply to his readers.

In contrast, Ralph Ellison is much more adept in handling his comic scenes. His *Invisible Man* owes much of its hilarity to the movement within the novel; as the nameless narrator, in his search for identity as a black male, moves from his native town in the South through a black college to Harlem, he takes up various masks imposed by people around him — masks of an entertainer, of a sex-machine, and of a charlatan. Such masks, the protagonist gradually learns, are the product of wishes, fears, or ambitions of those imposers. As he moves from one place to another, he discards his masks one after another until he is stuck; he literally ends up with falling into a manhole.

Throughout his pilgrimage, he continues in his role of a honest clown — the protagonist, in his flight from each of his blunders, keeps stumbling into the next plight graver than the previous one. And his blunder consists of his refusal to tell lies, lies which others want to hear. This method of generating humor by geographical movements is a common technique. The author of the medieval poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for instance, does precisely the

same thing. Sir Gawain, we remember, promises the mysterious Green Knight to engage in a combat in which each contestant tries to cut his adversary's head off — a promise a man of integrity has to keep, of course, but he would rather forget in the meanwhile. Sir Gawain begins his search for the residence of his adversary and in the course of his adventure, keeps running into a series of incidents which remind him of beheading in some way. The movement and repetition, in this instance, combine to create the funny element within the poem.

Ellison further generates the humorous atmosphere by expertly toying with subjects deemed as taboo in Western culture. Take the Trueblood episode for an example. While he is a junior at the southern black college, the narrator-protagonist is ordered to drive a Mr. Norton around. A millionaire philanthropist from the North, (his name suggests his representativeness) Mr. Norton is secretly obsessed with the incestuous desire for his daughter. (A desire that should remain unfulfilled because she is deceased.) In his eagerness to show Mr. Norton only what is proper in the black life in the South, the narrator does exactly the opposite — he inadvertently brings Mr. Norton to the presence of Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper who has become a pariah in his community because he committed incest with his daughter, which is a hell-bound sin in Christian countries. In a novel in which names are not without their significance, Trueblood is the only character who is given a positive-sounding name. And with reasons — he is a seasoned performer in the African-American oral tradition of tale-telling, After his incest has become known, white neighbors suddenly become anxious about him and they make him tell the story of the incest over and over again. The repeated performance put Trueblood in the perfect command of his art and he has become thoroughly familiar with the expectations of his white audience. He manipulates the reaction of his audience by creating suspense in his narrative and shapes his story to the best advantage to himself:

‘He [Trueblood] cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times.’<sup>(2)</sup>

Being the human nature as it is, his white neighbors' base instincts are fully satisfied. By giving money and presents, they enable Trueblood and his family to live in comfort. Trueblood, then, attains the stature of a folk hero because without appearing so, he can make white people behave in ways beneficial to him. All he has to do is to act out a role of a harmless, ignorant, and docile black male — a role in which southern whites would very much like to see him. Trueblood reminds us of John the slave in black folklore who seems silly yet is engaged in a subversive activity to his white master. Norton, a representative of the genteel and repressive culture of New England, desperately wants to hear the incident, yet cannot bring himself to ask directly. The comic comes from the utter failure of communication between Mr. Norton whose utterance takes on an almost biblical cadence and the illiterate Trueblood:

“Is it true. . . I mean did you?” [asks Mr. Norton.]

“Suh?” Trueblood asked, as I looked away.<sup>(3)</sup>

Mr. Norton again tries:

“You did and are unharmed!” he [Mr. Norton] shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation. Trueblood looked helplessly at me. I looked away. I understood no more than he.

“You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!”

“No suh! I feels all right.”

“You do? You feel no inner turmoil, no need to cast out the offending eye?”

“Suh?”

“Answer me!”

“I’m all right, suh,” Trueblood said uneasily. “My eyes is all right too. And when I feels po’ly in my gut I takes a little soda and it goes away.”<sup>(4)</sup>

The episode is outrageously funny throughout, and the fun comes partly from our recognition of the forbidden nature of the subject. There is something of poetic justice when Mr. Norton, livid with envy, avidly listens to every detail of Trueblood’s account and becomes sicker and sicker until he faints.

Yet another African-American writer Toni Morrison utilizes the traditional fun-provoking strategy of moving a character from one place to another in the second part of her *Song of Solomon*. The protagonist Milkman is a selfish young man from a bourgeois black family in a Midwestern town. In search for gold that enables him to become financially independent, he goes first to a rural community in Pennsylvania then to his ancestral hometown — a nowhere in Virginia where American commodity culture to which he is accustomed has scarcely penetrated. He cannot find gold, but he ends up with finding something of much more importance — his familial history which grants him not material security but self-esteem. As Milkman goes on his journey, he gradually loses all the civilized niceties with which he begins his trip. Milkman visits Circe, the midwife who helped his grandmother deliver his aunt Pilate, in a deserted mansion in Pennsylvania. She tells him that his grandparents were originally from Virginia and sets him on the right track. During his stay there Milkman loses his suitcase. Afterwards he goes to Virginia and learns his grandmother was an Indian, and in exchange for this piece of information he loses his wrist watch. As he loses his expensive personal belonging which has marked him off in class and value system from the lower-class rural blacks he encounters during his trip, his self-knowledge grows. And with self-knowledge, his self-respect grows. With his increasing maturity, he is being accepted by the surrounding black communities. As we read the latter part of the novel, a pattern emerges — as Milkman loses one of his things, this loss requires his move to the next place. Readers, secure in the knowledge of this pattern, find the repetition pleasing to their senses.

Morrison relies on another humorous strategy of the farce when Milkman, his father, and his friend Guitar conspire to steal from his aunt Pilate’s house a sack which they believe to contain gold. For adult males to carefully lay out a plan of burglary and to break into an all-female household fully armed seem much ado for nothing. The whole adventure appears silly especially when the parties concerned do not see the absurdity of the situation, yet this farce

suddenly grows dead serious when the burglars are arrested on their way home by police and the stolen sac is found to contain human bones instead of gold. White tyranny is emphasized when the black males are stopped and examined just because the police see the blacks are driving a car in the midnight and suspects a crime. The development of this incident has grave implications, for fair treatments cannot be expected from white law in the North in the early 1960s. For black men, involvement could mean death. The burglars are released when Pilate comes to the police and acts out the role of a pitifully ignorant and fawning black woman. Pilate, we know, is secure enough to be willing to let whites see her in a stereotypical role to achieve her goal of rescuing her nephew. Pilate is made to be seen in the long tradition of black folklore that has invented trickster heroes like John the clever slave and Brer Rabbit; those who constantly get themselves into a trouble with powerful enemies yet always manage to extricate themselves from punishment because of their command of improvising sophistry. Like Pilate and Trueblood, such trickster figures are willing to prone before their opponents as long as they can advance their own purposes. The burglary episode again becomes a nonsensical comedy once Pilate enters the scene. The theme is black ingenuity. This deceptive role-playing is of course an authentic form of subtle protest in African-American culture dating back to the time of slavery. Most of the time, a black has to contend with an overwhelmingly powerful opponent. Yet he wishes to convey the message of protest to his own in-group. Of course for the sake of his own safety, the element of protest has to be disguised. In a culture intent upon survival the final irony in such a self-conscious role-playing is that as the practitioner grows more adept in his guile, the dividing line between protest and obedience becomes so thin until the two become practically indistinguishable. The message of protest would often be lost even upon the members of the in-group.

As we have seen, Morrison blends typically African-American laughter with the larger comical tradition of the West and more shall be said about black sense of humor in the course of the discussion later. We can laugh at the freakish behavior of temperamental people but sometimes we can laugh at the universality of human behavior. Toward the end of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman locates a Susan Byrd in Virginia who may know about his Indian grandmother and on visiting her, he comes across Grace Long, a middle-aged school teacher and a friend of Susan's:

"What did you want to see me about?" Susan Byrd placed a mild but clear stress on the word "me."

"I'm trying to locate anybody who might have known my grandmother. Her name was Sing."

Grace clapped her hands to her mouth and gave a little squeal. "Relatives! You all are relatives!" Milkman put his cup down. "Well, I'll be!" Grace's eyes were lit and dancing.

"You've come to the right place," said Susan, "but I doubt if I can help you any."

"What are you talking about, Susan? Your mother was named Sing, wasn't she?"

"No she wasn't, Grace, and if you let me finish a sentence you might learn something

you don't know too."

"I thought you said — "

"My mother's name was Mary. M-a-r-y, Mary."

"Well, excuse *me*."<sup>(5)</sup>

Grace is a typically irrepressible old maid. Leading a monotonous life in a rural area, she is hungry for any gossip that might come her way. As is often the case, she is extremely insensitive and will not take a hint from Susan, who is obviously embarrassed by the possibility of a dark-skinned relative and is certainly unwilling to discuss such intimate matters in her presence. Having no sense of privacy, she constantly gets on the nerves of those around her. The obtuseness of this impossible friend provides a comic chorus to the conversation between the other two. Susan is visibly dismayed, but Grace is thrilled, is hardly able to wait for the disclosure of a familial secret which she is going to spread in her community. So, the comic here is the truth contained in the proverb, "Somebody's tragedy is everybody else's comedy."

Or, consider the scene in *The Bluest Eye* where Claudia the narrator's mother is upset by the huge quantity of milk consumed by Picola, her temporary charge.

The consumption of milk triggers a series of complaints and they are intended for the girls to hear:

"... I don't know what I'm suppose to be running here, a charity ward, I guess. Time for me to get out of the *giving* line and get in the *getting* line. I guess I ain't *supposed* to have nothing. I'm *supposed* to end up in the poorhouse. Look like nothing I do is going to keep me out of there. Folks just spend all their time trying to figure out ways to send *me* to the poorhouse. I got about as much business with another mouth to feed as a cat has with side pockets. As if I don't have trouble enough trying to feed my own and keep out the poorhouse, now I got something else in here that's just going to *drink* me on in there. Well, naw, she ain't. Not long as I got strength in my body and a tongue in my head. There's a limit to everything. I ain't got nothing to just throw *away*. Don't nobody need *three* quarts of milk. Henry Ford don't need three quarts of milk."<sup>(6)</sup>

The passage is droll in spite of the nagging tone. Her stance is a classic one; a lone sane person in an insane world. The exaggeration contained in her pose of a martyr also tickles us, but we notice this is a typically feminine line of reasoning. We encounter an adult woman giving the piece of her mind anywhere whenever a trivial amount of pressure brings the stress of the everyday living to the breaking point. She is not reacting to the here and now of the situation, rather she is suggesting the existence of a certain consistently malignant plan behind all the apparently unconnected causes of complaint in her list — a cosmic principle of persecuting her. Since she herself cannot locate the source of this plan, the question "why this misery?" contained in her tirade is an unanswerable one. One is struck with the judicious juxtaposition of details and similes that startle (a cat with side pockets, poor as a bowl of yak-me, Sandy Claus of a woman). In short, we are somehow persuaded that Claudia's mother is perfectly justifiable in her perfectly irrational outburst.

Sometimes, laughter can be provoked by a context. In *The Bluest Eye*, Mr. Henry, a roomer at Claudia's house, is caught in the act of sexually molesting Claudia's sister and is knocked down by their father. He immediately gets up and starts singing 'Nearer My God to Thee.' The scene is funny because of the sheer incongruity of the obscene situation and the hymn this situation occasions. (Its theme is the attainment of saintliness through martyrdom.) The contrast is intended as ludicrous and it works.

In her second novel *Sula*, Morrison experiments a brief anatomy of African-American sense of humor as expressed in their repertory of jokes. (Jokes are also called as lies.) One of the conventional black pastimes, lies are told in a lying session in which the participants take turns as tale-tellers and compete each other to outjest all the others. They decide who tell the most extravagant tale, thus the session is the occasion for a test of the verbal competence of the participants. By improvising an preposterous tale, the performer compels his listeners vividly to imagine the situation. Lies are an appropriate naming because veracity is irrelevant as long as created jokes can entertain. Thus, a lying session or a tell-tale session is a game, an occasion for a display of the ability of improvisation of the tale-teller. Extraordinary lies about Sula are made up by the black residents of the Bottom after she outraged her community by sending her grandmother to old folks' home and by sleeping with the husbands of her neighbors:

. . . It was rumoured that she had had no childhood diseases, was never known to have chicken pox, croup or even a runny nose. She had played rough as a child — where were the scars? Except for a funny-shaped finger and that evil birthmark, she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability. Some of the men, who as boys had dated her, remembered that on picnics neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her. Patsy, Hannah's [Sula's mother's] one-time friend, agreed and said not only that, but she had witnessed the fact that when Sula drank beer she never belched.<sup>(7)</sup>

The black community depicted here has a distinct value system in which women's roles are rigidly prescribed and proper attitudes toward things like religion and love are clearly defined. Sula is profoundly disturbing to the members of her community because they cannot put convenient labels to her unconventional behaviors. (She does not become jealous of any of her lovers and people around her only know love as possession, for example.) She is not like any granddaughter, neighbor, or slut that they know. So they choose to define Sula as a supernatural evil. The tell-tale session, we are meant to understand, is a time for collective articulation of the value system by the members within a given black community. They tell lies to pass on judgements. People exploit Sula to effect a group solidity.

African-American jokes are complex and tormented, Toni Morrison points out, because they are a product of a group of people who have long been victimized by the majority group. *Sula* contains a nigger joke of a black slave who was promised a piece of land by his master in exchange for some particularly difficult chores. The cunning white persuaded the unsuspecting slave to take a barren hilly land instead of the fertile valley land which had been

the original reward, saying it was the bottom of heaven. Here, the joke does not seek to criticize the unfairness of the deceitful white. It merely explains why blacks in Medallion, Ohio have to live in the sterile land called the Bottom while the more yielding soil is appropriated by whites. According to Morrison, one dominant characteristic of black sense of humor is the unquestioning acceptance of the status quo. Traditional folktales abound in stories which explain the origin of things such as discrimination and the color of the skins. Too often, pleasure and pain are inseparably mixed up in black jokes, and they define laughter as a strategy to keep a person from crying. The ability to laugh distinguishes human beings from mere animals and even though whites treat African-Americans as beasts cramped beneath irrational burden, black people assert and regain their dignity as human beings through shared laughter when they are safely remote from white oppression. In a lying session, the tale-teller is the protagonist of a one-act play during the duration of his narrative and when he is through, another becomes the protagonist of yet a different drama.

Furthermore, black humor as expressed in lies prohibits the listeners to be merely passive recipients of the jokes. At one point in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman and Guitar come across Railroad Tommy and Hospital Tommy, the two proprietors of a barber shop in the South Side, the ghetto section of their town. When Guitar complains about a bottle of beer that was denied him, Railroad Tommy begins to predict all good things denied black males:

“. . . You not going to have no private coach with four red velvet chairs that swivel around in one place whenever you want ‘em to. No. And you not going to have your own special tiolet and your own special-made light-foot bed either. And a valet and a cook and a secretary to travel with you and do everything you say. Everything: get the right temperature in your hot-water bottle and make sure the smoking tobacco in the silver humidor is fresh each and every day. That’s something else you not going to have. . . ”<sup>(8)</sup>

After a while, Railroad Tommy brings his tirade to the conclusion:

“And *no* baked Alaska!” Railroad Tommy went on. “None! You never going to have that.”

“No baked Alaska?” Guitar opened his eyes wide with horror and grabbed his throat.

“You breaking my heart!”

“Well, now. That’s something you will have — a broken heart.” Railroad Tommy’s eyes softened, but the merriment in them died suddenly. “And folly. A whole lot of folly, You can count on it.”<sup>(9)</sup>

This passage reveals a few important things about black verbal rituals. Primarily, Railroad Tommy is engaged in a boasting of his vocal virtuosity. Yet it is more: it is also a shrewd enumeration of earthly trials undergone by black males. What Tommy, a disillusioned old man, is saying that considering the paucity of options accessible to blacks in America, in face of an organized discrimination in job openings, in housing, and even in the army, dreams are a dangerous thing to conceive. Yet he indulges in going over pleasures afforded by unattainables which he lovingly narrates and invites the two youths to share his sensual pleasures through imagination.

More important, Tommy's performance challenges the boys to actively participate by responding. It is intended as an initiation rite to the folk culture of urban blacks. So Guitar responds on the spur of the moment, and Tommy shapes his subsequent oral performance to suit Guitar's response. Guitar's first attempt of improvisation is evaluated by the passers-by who show their approval by their laughter. We notice the contrast between Guitar's responsiveness and Milkman's complete lack of response. Such differing attitudes are due to the difference of their backgrounds. Guitar is a ghetto youth while Milkman is an offspring of black middle-class. The traditional verbal rites which have survived the people's migration from the rural South to the urban North has become defunct, it seems, among black bourgeoisie. Not until well into his trip to the South is Milkman able to participate in the tale-telling session as a contestant. And his growing ability to tell lies is also a sign of his fuller assimilation into black communities. Thus, traditional verbal rituals are successfully transmitted in the urban North only among lower-class people.

In the backward Virginia, Milkman becomes very good in the lying competition and the initially hostile village people feel very secure in their friendship with him so they joke about him:

They [Milkman and menfolk] met dawn in King Walker's gas station for a rehash of the night they had spent. Milkman was the butt of their humor, quite unlike the laughter the trip had begun with. "Lucky to be alive. Cat wasn't the problem; this here nigger was the problem. Blastin away at us while we got a mean cat getting ready to chew us and the dogs up both. Shootin all through the woods. Could have blown his own head off. Don't you city boys know how to handle yourself?"

"You country niggers got it all over us," Milkman answered.<sup>(10)</sup>

All friendships have ingredients of animosity in them and our friends may wish us good luck in our examinations but they may also say, "I hope you fail," with a rougish twinkle in their eyes. They feel safe to express themselves in this way with us. Teasing is only possible with a person who we know is intelligent enough to appreciate our playful slander — thus, joking is a token of acknowledgement of one's intelligence.

Shared laughter is an evidence of group solidarity. Black culture is unafraid of confrontations. It assumes that mentally one is tough enough not to lose one's head if insulted and a participant of verbal rites such as the lying session expects the other party to be also tough enough to stomach insults. Black culture has developed strategies to train such insult-proof attitude in behaviors like the dozens and soundings. Such verbal rites feature boastful and intimidating phrasing and it is wrong to become angry or act hurt or is taken back by such challenges because such responses are the exposure of vulnerabilities. Black people usually engage in this kind of a game in the presence of buddies because they can function as the audience ( for it is conducted for the entertainment of all) and as judges ( for it is also a competition of verbal virtuosity of the performers) and when some contestant does lose his head and physically assault his partner, they can break them up as referees. The expressions in

which the game is clothed is in fact insulting so the boundaries between the actual fight and the play is not always clear. (Look at the derogatory word “nigger” in the previous quotation.) The ritual insult is the wisdom of the street to avoid actual confrontation by assuming the tough guy’s pose. Black verbal rites including insults are the folk wisdom to channel aggression into a socially acceptable form.

As might be expected, African-American sense of humor does have its negative sides. It functions as a defense mechanism against the predominant hostile culture. Whites insisted that black males were attracted by white women and regarded them in a stereotypical image of potential rapists. The championing of white womanhood was often offered as an excuse for lynching black males. In other words, white men imagined their own manhood was intimidated by the rivalry from black men and they tried to deny black males the full dignity of an adult. As a response to such humiliation, black men produced jokes with strong streak of self-hatred. Tommy’s Barbershop is a sanctuary for black males to swap tales and at one time, men gather there to discuss the murder of Emmet Till, a northern black boy visiting Mississippi.

Here, we see laughter functioning as a way to contain fear:

“You stupid, man. Real stupid. Ain’t no law for no colored man except the one sends him to the chair,” said Guitar.

“They say Till had a knife,” Freddie said.

“They always say that. He could have had a wad of bubble gum, they’d swear it was a hand grenade.”

“I still say he shoulda kept his mouth shut,” said Freddie.

“You should keep yours shut,” Guitar told him.

“Hey, man!” Again Freddie felt the threat.<sup>(11)</sup>

Then follows the author’s analysis:

The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they’d witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then, uproariously, about the speed with which they had run, the pose they had assumed, the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness.<sup>(12)</sup>

Laughter is tormented because it is a desperate attempt to keep the semblance of their essential humanity, to keep sanity despite the crippling reality of oppression. For insecure males whose manhood is constantly challenged by the surrounding society, the questioning of somebody’s manliness is a sure-fire provocation to the actual fight.

Yet laughter is not merely a product of pathological reaction to the dominant white culture. We have seen how black wry humor serves multiple purposes. Black writers like Richard Wright and Ann Petry eliminate nearly all aspects of the comic from their works which depict the bitterness and violence of African-American experience in the urban ghettos in the North in the belief that black folk traditions are severed in the new environment. Others

like Zola Neale Hurston and Toni Cade Bambara drop confrontation between blacks and whites in their works and concentrate the black masse enjoying their oral culture in the belief that black experiences can be told without the constant reference to white discrimination.

Morrison's handling of the humorous seems to be somewhere in between. She depicts the negative aspects of the folk heritage as well as its positive aspects. Morrison's female characters seem to be deposited with life-affirming qualities of black laughter. Her male characters are often given names like Tar Baby, BoyBoy, Plum and Milkman which imply their immaturity. They are often pampered by the stronger-minded females of their family and are infantile in their selfish pursuit of pleasure. And males are more readily crushed by confrontation with whites and accordingly become victims of self-loathing.

Morrison is interested in pariahs in black communities because theirs are a marginal existence within itself a marginal society. Shadrack and Soaphead Church are pariahs because of their insanity and Deweys and Pilate because of their physical deformity. Sula through her wilfull violation of communal mores and the three prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye* because of their profession. Yet it is such pariahs that Morrison frequently invests positive sense of humor. Sula, for example, refuses to sympathize her best friend Nel's husband Jude when he narrates his experience of humiliation by white people whom he meets as a waiter of a hotel restaurant. Sula says:

. . . 'I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I know a white woman wouldn't leave the house after 6 o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Coloured women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children — white and black, boys and girls — spend all their childhood eating out their hearts 'cause they think you don't love them, and if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day. So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world.'<sup>(13)</sup>

It is a matter of a perspective, Sula is saying. To achieve comic effects, she uses exaggeration about white men's inferiority complex in terms of sexual prowess, about white women's superstition that they are the prize and about black men's drive for mobility in direct clash with black women's need for stability — in short, about all the current myths in America. Sula also uses similar sentence structures, particularly the variations of "ain't that love?" to drive her point home. What emerges is a recommendation of unsentimentality, a steadfast refusal to indulge in self-pity. Sula, an offspring of an all-female household, takes an attitude

similar to that of the three prostitutes who also maintain an all-female household. Morrison seems to be intent upon exploring the problems such matriarchal households posit. The matriarchal family in Morrison's novels is free from the sterile materialism characterizing patriarchal families. But the all-female household is presented as a unit in which the necessary discipline of curbing one's appetites is sadly neglected and as particularly inimical to its young members. Members of such a family do not know how to interact with males, and consequently tend to spoil every male who come within its sphere of activities.

Charged with ambiguities, however, such a matriarchal family does produce most of the free-spirited characters that populate the novels. Ambivalence prevails because in such a household, the mother is often an unsubstantial entity and the grandmother and the granddaughter are joined in a much stronger bond.

Anyway, the "free" characters in the novels frequently hold the most exhilarating piece of conversations. They shock other characters because they are liberated from forms which the society imposes for the sake of politeness and are consequently unable to hold any superficial conversations. Thus, the jocose moments are realized by the behaviors of idiosyncratic individuals. (They are the "free" characters.)

Summoned to the police, Pilate begins her expert performance of a long-suffering black woman upon a very short notice and without any cues from Milkman and Guitar who are arrested with a sack containing human bones:

. . . Pilate *had* been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn't even come up to the sergeant's shoulder — and the sergeant's head barely reached Milkman's own chin. But Pilate was as tall as he was. . . And her hands were shaking as she described how she didn't know the sack was gone until the officer woke her up; that she couldn't imagine why anybody would want to run off with her husband's bones; that her husband had been lynched in Mississippi fifteen years ago, and that they wouldn't let her cut him down, and that she left town then and that when she went back the body had dropped off the rope of its own accord, so she collected it and tried to bury it, but the "funeral peoples" wanted fifty dollars for a coffin, and the carpenter wanted twelve-fifty for a pine box and she just didn't have no twelve dollars and fifty cents so she just carried what was left of Mr. Solomon (she always called him Mr. Solomon cause he was such a dignified colored man) and put it in a sack and kept it with her. "Bible say what so e'er the Lord hath brought together, let no men put asunder — Matthew Twenty-one: Two. We was bony fide and legal wed, suh," she pleaded. Even her eyes, those big sleepy old eyes, were small as she went on: "So I thought I just as well keep him near me and when I die they can put him in the same hole as me. We'll raise up to Judgment Day together. Hand in hand."<sup>(14)</sup>

The whole story is of course a complete lie and the details of the disposal of the corpse is utterly irrelevant to the present tenet of the police investigation. Pilate here attains the heroic stature of the folk hero, one who can get away from his mighty opponent (him be a white

man or an alligator) with his improvised tales.

Laughter does not change the reality of white discrimination. But laughter makes the actual power balance topple for the moment of its duration and makes the laughing person momentarily forget the fear of possible threats to his life. Essentially, Morrison testifies the psychic health and resilience of black people as expressed in their sense of humor. They manage to see the comic in adversary situations and the articulation of it is a way of triumphing over the oppressive circumstance. Instead of being crippled, they turn inward and create ironic jokes and manage to laugh a complicated laughter.

I have tried to show how Morrison utilizes typically African-American repertory of laughter transmitted from generation to generation among black communities. She does not see black humor merely as a defense mechanism against the hostile reality of discrimination. Her stance is, I believe, something akin to that of F. Scott Fitzgerald as expressed in his *Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald makes use of jazz in the novel in order to unobtrusively imply the possibility of an alternative to the sterile white civilization, a much more pleasing and satisfactory culture practised by a seemingly victimized people. Novels after *Song of Solomon* grow more pessimistic in their tones and there is much less play of humor. With *Song of Solomon*, Morrison must have felt that she has fully explored the implications of black comic sense and with *Tar Baby*, she goes on to explore the tragic consequences of the African-American lifestyle that has rejected its heritage at some point during the quest for upward mobility.

#### NOTES

- (1) Wallace Thurman, *The Blacker The Berry*. . . (1929; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 3-4.
- (2) Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947; rpt. New York: Random House, 1972), p. 53.
- (3) *Invisible Man*, p.51.
- (4) *Invisible Man*, p.51.
- (5) Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1978), pp. 292-293.
- (6) Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970; rpt. New York: Gulf and Western, 1972), p. 23.
- (7) Toni Morrison, *Sula* (1973; rpt. London: Triad, 1986), pp. 104-105.
- (8) *Song of Solomon*, pp. 59-60.
- (9) *Song of Solomon*, p. 60.
- (10) *Song of Solomon*, p. 284.
- (11) *Song of Solomon*, p. 82.
- (12) *Song of Solomon*, p. 83.
- (13) *Sula*, p. 95.
- (14) *Song of Solomon*, p. 208.