DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 473 CS 216 550

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TITLE Ain't I a Woman: Affirming the Place of the African Woman in America.
PUB DATE 1998-03-30
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (49th, Chicago, IL, April 1-4, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Blacks; Classroom Techniques; Ethnic Groups; *Females; Feminism; Higher Education; Literature Appreciation; *Minority Groups; Reading Instruction; Social Bias; Social Discrimination; Student Empowerment; *Subcultures; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *African Americans; *Morrison (Toni)

ABSTRACT

A reading and writing instructor of a population of students who are largely "marginalized" (of African descent, female, and/or poor) sees the literature of Toni Morrison as a relevant and critical teaching tool. Additionally, the instructor believes it is important to look critically at Morrison's literature for several reasons: (1) Morrison raises the political consciousness of students in order to enable them to actuate against this oppression and to empower them to transform the social structure that is oppressing them; (2) she writes to "bear witness" (to confirm or reinforce the truth) to the material conditions of the black woman in America and her responsibility for bringing their community together; and (3) she emphasizes the black female experience and provides a prototype for the way they should live their lives. One way for the instructor to determine whether the students have internalized this African concept of "humanism" and/or "cultural feminism" is to ask them to write about male-female relationships with which they are involved and/or observe. Also, after reading Morrison's works, students and teacher analyze and make comparisons between male-female relationships. The instructor's objectives are to have students come to realize the importance of their responsibility to each other, their families, and their communities, and to celebrate black women's accomplishments and to reach out to others in the community. (CR)

Charlotte Harris-Benn
Four Cs Presentation
30 March 1998

Ain't I A Woman: Affirming the Place of the African Woman in America [1]

In her book about black women and feminism which is appropriately entitled *Ain't I A Woman*, bell hooks writes: "...the white man who yelled at Sojourner [Truth], 'I don't believe you really are a woman' unwittingly voiced America's contempt and disrespect for black womanhood," (159). Even though this event transpired over 100 years ago, I contend that this tone yet prevails in our "Land of the free." My purpose here, therefore, is to enlighten you about how I instruct "marginalized" students to read and write critically in order to empower them to transform the structure of power in society. They are empowered, as a result of raising their critical consciousness and enabling them to contend with the negative tone/attitude so that they will no longer live on the edge but instead will become beings for themselves.

I argue consequently that if we pay heed to rhetoric, we begin to see how gender, race and class are constructed in society. Accordingly if we scrutinize the literature of the African-American woman, we will determine that her literature provides a perspective that reveals her objectiveness, her forgiveness, her tenacity and her strength, as a result of her position in society, that other perspectives can not reveal. Furthermore, because of their position in American society, the black woman also writes from the perspective of "marginality," which bell hooks defines as being "part of the whole but outside the main body," (6).

Writing about and from the perspective of a black author(s) in the preface of *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,* hooks sheds this enlightenment about living on the edge:

> Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention in and from the inside out. We

> focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgment that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole.

In that same vein, Toni Morrison, in her literature, narrates the ethos of the black woman in American. This ethos narrated by Morrison is the ethos of "ethnic cultural feminism." That is those women who subscribe to this "ethnic cultural feminism" keep their allegiance to their ancestral group, and their concern with feminism is more group-centered than self-centered, more cultural than political. Carolyn Denard, in support of this assertion, avers Morrison's role, as an ethnic cultural feminist, has been to try to alleviate the prejudices and misconceptions, which ridicule the matriarchal strength and selflessness of the black woman in America. Instead, argues Denard, Morrison seeks not to romanticize the role of this strong matriarchal figure, but to show the value and difficulty of the role she serves in a society which is both racially and sexually oppressive, (Critical Essays, 72-73).

Consequently, as a reading and writing instructor of a population of students, who are largely "marginalized"—of African descent, female and/or poor—I see the literature of Toni Morrison as a relevant and critical teaching tool. Additionally, I see it as being important for us to look critically at her literature, and we do this for several reasons:

1. ***Morrison raises*** the political consciousness of the students in order to enable them to actuate against this oppression, and to empower them to transform the social structure that is presently oppressing them. To echo Freire from *Pedagogy Of the Oppressed*:

> The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not 'marginals,' are not living 'outside' society. They have always been 'inside'—inside the structure which made them 'beings for others.' The solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves, (55).

2. ***Morrison writes*** to "bear witness"— this term means to confirm or reinforce the truth—to the material conditions of the black woman in American, and her responsibility for bringing our community together.

3. ***Morrison emphasizes*** the black female experience and provides a prototype for the way we should live our lives—our responsibilities as black women to our children, our men, our elders, and our communities. "We must have mercy from within."

It is my theory that Morrison's literature, and the examination of the ethos of the black woman, therefore, will allow my students to realize their own self-actualization by accepting responsibility for their homes, families and communities.

Raising Political Consciousness in the Classroom

I concur with the thinking of Villanueva when he says that "Literature can be set up so as to create a dialectic between differing worldviews [sic], between national-cultural and the critical," (99). In my opinion, Morrison's literature creates this dialectic. Additionally I argue that reading Morrison is one medium that will enable students to learn their history and its place in American society as it has developed and as it is now before they can forge a better future for themselves, their families and their communities. Again, we read Morrison's literature because it reveals a hypothesis promulgated by Morrison, other black scholars and myself. This argument is that blacks suffer equally from both class and racial exploitation and that one form of exploitation is the result of the other. It is important for us (my students and myself) to examine this hypothesis from the perspective of the underclass, therefore, if we are to empower ourselves to transform the structure of the culture of power so that we can become beings for ourselves. Morrison's novels, I argue, allow us to make these heuristics.

For example, as argued by Doreatha Mbalia, among others, *Tar Baby and Beloved* clearly indicate it is the economic system of capitalism, characterized by the exploitation of one group of people by another, that gives birth to and continues to fuel racism and sexism, (17). In support of

this hypothesis, moreover, Morrison indicates, in an interview with Judith Wilson, that *Tar Baby* is not about a sexual or a cultural conflict rather it is about the impact of racism on blacks in America. I agree with Morrison and others, who assert that racism does not impact all blacks in the same manner. They react to it in various ways, and it is imperative that we understand this. As some blacks succumb to the other culture's standard of beauty and they come to value outward appearance rather than inner qualities, and outer appearance becomes their measuring stick, for example, they behave more and more as the culture of power expects them. A poignant example of this is cited by Barbara Christian who makes this point: "So the Breedloves [*Bluest Eye*] fight and destroy each other in their ugly store front because they come to believe in their ugliness, their intrinsic unworthiness." In *Sula*, in contrast to the *Bluest Eye*, the emphasis is purported to be the one quality the Bottom community shares with the world—their definition of woman her span and space. In actuality, the impact of racism on some blacks interpretation of Nature further reinforces the world's limited view and definition of woman—her limited span and space ("Community and Nature," 53).

Other examples of how oppression may impact people who are marginalized are through self-absorption or selfishness, conservatism (being inactive instead of proactive), and for some it is their insatiable need for possessions and financial security. Morrison, through her literature resists these ideas of selfishness, the wait and hope for the better approach, or the ideology of possessiveness. For Morrison the adherence to either one of the ideologies results in a form of death. Witness how Sula dies of self-absorption and also in this novel many of the folks who lived in the Bottom die from their too long insistence on mere survival, which illustrates conservatisivism. Additionally, in *Song of Solomon* Macon Dead's pursuit of wealth and security resulted in the death of a happy and fulfilling family life as illustrated by his son's running away

from home and choked lives endured by his wife and daughters. On the other hand, Pilate, Macon Dead's sister, who is conservative and lives in the past and apart from the world that surrounds her, is not able to hold on to her granddaughter, Hagar. Even though Pilate and Reba, Hagar's mother, give Hagar an all-encompassing love and the same kind of attention, this does not stop the poison of the feeling of worthlessness that finally kills Hagar. For in basing the whole reason for her existence on Milkman's love for her, Hagar comes to believe that he rejects her because she does not possess "silky hair," "lemon-colored skin," and "gray-blue eyes," (316). Milkman Dead, however, because of his discovery of his "roots" and because of his coming to understand his ancestry, does find meaning in his life. Consequently, he is able to fly away and transcend the "deadness" of his family circle.

Cornel West also helps to explain my pedagogical theory about critically examining Morrison in his essay "Black Women and Men: Partnership in the 1990s." (A dialogue between he and bell hooks on the campus of Yale University.) He avers, importantly, that there is a crisis of black males and females in the black communities across this nation. This crisis does not only include the obvious—drug addiction, it also includes the unfair redistribution of the wealth from the bottom to the top, —coupled with our community's preoccupation with consumption and the eroding of the feeling of community and tradition. "Reclaiming our heritage and sense of history are prerequisites [says West] to any serious talk about black freedom and black liberation in the twenty-first century." And, he continues, " Critical understanding among black people and other progressive people is also the praxis that will be necessary for us to talk seriously about black power, black liberation in the twenty-first century". It is my aim, therefore, to employ this praxis in my classroom in order to empower my students to realize the importance of connecting to their community, and establishing wholesome male-female relationships. More importantly, their

political consciousness must be raised so that they will assume responsibility for taking care of each other, their families and their communities.

One way for me to determine whether or not the students have internalized this African concept of "humanism" and/ or "cultural feminism" is to ask them to write about male-females relationships. Relationships with which they are involved and/or they observe. Hopefully through this experience of discussion and writing they will come to realize again the importance of their responsibility to each other, their families and their communities. Furthermore after reading *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*, the students and I analyze and make comparisons between the male-female relationships of Jadine and Son (*Tar Baby)*, which tends to be bittersweet, and the relationship of Sethe and Paul D. (*Beloved*), which is friendly and loving. We question what causes these relationships to be so different? Why we think the characters react differently? Furthermore I ask them to privately reflect about to which relationship they can best relate. Even more important than having my students to look heuristically at male-female relationships, another of my objectives for reading *Tar Baby* and *Beloved* is to enable students to understand that no woman, who strives to advance her situation socially, educationally, or economically should apologize. Rather we should celebrate their accomplishments and reach out to others in the community. Although I must admit that sometimes I do not successfully achieve my objectives.

Engaged Pedagogy and Critical Consciousness

bell hooks in her book, *Teaching to Transgress* writes about Paulo Freiere's pedagogical theory and practice:

> Freiere's insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called 'conscientization' in the classroom. Translating that term to critical awareness and engagement...

She writes further about having the conviction that each of her students should be an active classroom participant and not a passive consumer. I too subscribe to this theory and practice in my classroom and concomitantly agree with Freire's emphasis on "praxis"—action and reflection upon the world in order to change it (14). Morrison's literature allows me (Charlotte Harris-Benn) therefore, to create my strategies for what Freire calls "conscientization."

Morrison's development of the women characters in her novels, by way of illustration, parallels the way in which many black women combine their concern for feminism and ethnicity. Black women, just as others, have experienced racial and sexual oppression continuously since her forced immigration to America. Sadly, there are many stories told and untold about the negative assumptions that white men have about the bodies of black women even today. Black women abhor this oppression. Because of their minority status, which keeps their allegiance to their ancestral group foremost, however, most shun an advocacy of the kind of political, existential feminism embraced by many women of the majority culture. Again to affirm the ethos of "ethnic cultural feminism," for black women, their concern with feminism is usually more group-centered than self-centered, more cultural than political.

Albeit that Morrison also ascribes to the philosophy of "cultural feminism," she still does "bear witness" to atrocity of sexual and racial oppression endured by African-American females. She exposes the damages that sexual oppression, both inside and outside of the ethnic group, has on black women. For example, witness how Morrison explores what many in the black community believes to be one of the most damaging components of sexual and racial oppression on black women: the perpetuation by the larger society of a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self-worth. This theme is explored in *Bluest Eye*. And of course, there is Beloved. Through reading Morrison's *Beloved*, the students recognize the origins of racism. Here

she is very adept at documenting slavery, its aftermath, and the origins of racism in America. She lays it out as though it is were sketched on a giant canvas: the separation of women and children from their men; the treatment of slaves—both male and female, children and adults—as beasts of burden; and the sexual exploitation of African women by European men. Like horses Paul D. and other male slaves are hitched to wagons with "bits" in their mouths. Like a cow, Sethe is milked by her slavemasters. Yet Morrison does not allow these negatives to characterize their experience. She does not advocate as a solution to their oppression an existential, political feminism that alienates black women from their ethnic group. Instead, she is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression. Thus the women that Morrison celebrates in her fiction are those who exhibit the traditional values of black womanhood. A case in point, drawing from the African myth of the "tar lady," Morrison reconvenes the historical ability of black women to keep their families and their households together the "tar quality." And it is in the development of these "tar women" that Morrison herself engages in the kind of ethnic cultural feminism that she, others, and myself advocate. My aim, consequently, is to empower my female students, regardless of race or ethnicity, to become, if they are not already, "tar women," and my male students to recognize the benefits of this empowerment.

An example of "tar women" are the older black women described in the *Bluest Eye* and Violet as well as Dorcas' Aunt Alice in her novel *Jazz*, who provide an eloquent panoramic example of what Morrison considers the "tar quality" of black women. These women held things together in side and outside the home; they understood the historical circumstances that limited their own potential as well as that of their men. Yet in spite of these limiting circumstances, they created their own positive images. And although their roles might be viewed by contemporary standards as

limiting, they are the roles that have continuously sustained black family and community life. Again, this is the ethos that Morrison and I want to convey to my students.

With these goals in mind then we read Morrison's novels *Beloved and Jazz, as a class we* also view videos, as well as read and discuss interviews and conversations in which Morrison discusses her intentions and purposes for writing. Additionally, my students and I write about and share our experiences and reflections with, and as "tar women." Most of us certainly know at least one such person, and as a result of writing about, reflecting upon, and discussing our experiences we can come to critically realize their value to our society regardless of their race, ethnicity or culture.

It is also important to note that Morrison creates characters, which raise objections to this cultural feminism. Jadine, (*Tar Baby*), Sula and Dorcas (*Jazz*) are examples. They speak out against their oppression and criticize black women who serve in these "limiting roles." While Morrison allows them full opportunity to voice their objection to what they view as the limited life of black women, she does not condone their existentialist position. Again in support of this theory, in an interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison suggests that a definition of self that excludes an ethnic cultural connection will for minority women finally be empty and meaningless. Morrison is so adamant about affirming the domestic roles women have served that rather than to diminish their worth, she accentuates the value of and the inner strength required to perform them. And according to Denard, " [T]o reject a connection to these women, Morrison suggests, would be to negate the cultural values that have gone into making black women different from all other women. Thus the women, in her novels, who assume existentialist positions are always made to come to terms with the community or they are haunted by a feeling of betrayal of its cultural values, (Essays, pg.174). This is the message I want my students to hear.

During these classroom discussions various ideologies do surface. My students and I discuss the realities of the traditional limited lifestyles of the black woman. They write to know what they are thinking about the impact of racial, class and gender oppression in their lives. The writings are often narrative and some are autobiographical. Some students reject the critical views. Many of the females especially want to reject the "ethnic cultural feminism" philosophy expounded by Morrison and myself. Their purpose for attending college essentially, they remind others and myself, is to liberate them from all oppression. And in trying to escape gender, race and class oppression, some of them try to escape their heritage. Again this is one of the imprints of racial and sexual oppression. These female students are often heard to say, for example, "I don't want to be like my mother." However, I posit that these are very critical times for my population of students because we face some critical issues. Issues such as the welfare reform crisis, and the abysmal failure of our urban schools to educate poor and minority children to achieve academic and economic success. It is imperative, accordingly, for them to realize the importance of their connecting with the community before they can talk about " black power," and or "black liberation" in the twenty-first century. And Morrison narrates for them the ethos of humanism, collectivism and communism—this is what she refers to as, "Mercy from within."

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Ain't I a Woman: Affirming the Voice of Multicultural Women in America.

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April 1-4, 1998

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