

**ETHICS AND AESTHETICS
IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION**

Mariangela Palladino

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This volume is an interesting addition to the scholarship on the novels of Toni Morrison, the 1993 Nobel Prize winner and a key African American writer. Palladino's book takes into account previous criticism on Morrison's fiction and examines the role that ethics and aesthetics play in the second phase of her career, i.e. in the novels *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997) and *Love* (2003). Palladino explains that by aesthetics she means the "representation of human emotions in the arts" (19), particularly in literature. She clarifies that by "examining ethics" she refers to observing discourse, the linguistic contexts of Morrison's novels, and the relations between texts and otherness (19-20). Palladino studies how ethics affects the representation and interpretation of emotions in the four novels under study. She leaves aside Morrison's early works —*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Tar Baby* (1981)— arguing that they deal with identity formation, and focuses on *Love* and the books that make up Morrison's black history trilogy (1987-1998), an alternative narrative about the black experience in the United States.

In the Introduction, the author explains that the common thread of the trilogy and the 2003 novel is love and its different manifestations, for instance motherly love in *Beloved*, lustful love in *Jazz*, friendship in *Paradise*, and family love in *Love*. The main body of Palladino's book consists of six chapters that discuss key issues in these four novels, such as the narrative voices, memory, orality, and the role

played by the characters' hands. Chapter 1 focuses on previous studies of narrative discourse and explores pragmatics and speech acts. Following this overview, Palladino argues that “[t]o tell a story implies a responsibility for both the teller and the receiver” (29), since the narrator gives readers a series of fragments that they have to piece together and interpret.

Chapter 2 looks at memory as a mode of narrating and analyzes it in both *Beloved* and *Paradise*. The latter novel introduces the concept of ‘loud dreaming’, meaning that the African American community has a need for collective memory as a way of escaping from the dominant version of history, telling their own stories, and coping with their traumatic past. Most of Chapter 2 revolves around *Beloved* and how this fragmented neo-slave narrative deals with the trauma of slavery. The protagonist, Sethe, is a former slave who kills her own daughter because she fears they will both be returned to the plantation. In her essay “The Site of Memory”, Toni Morrison explains that authors of slave narratives often had to omit some details—usually the most gruesome ones—when describing the horrors of slavery because they feared their readers’ response and critical hostility (1995: 88). This is not the case with *Beloved*. By retelling Sethe’s story and how it affects her black community in Ohio, Morrison writes about what has been omitted from canonical versions of American history. Palladino considers Morrison’s remarks and convincingly explains that the author’s quest for memory turns into the ethical imperative of her fiction. The black communities in *Beloved* and *Paradise* need to share their traumatic past in order to face the future together and move on. Palladino opens up a promising line of discussion when she addresses the role played by the discourses of salvation and redemption in these two novels since both books deviate from traditional patterns and advocate collective memory as a way of revisiting the past and redeeming communities. It will be interesting to read where this line of discussion takes the researcher in her future studies.

In Chapter 3 Palladino analyzes how Morrison plays with multiple narrative voices and sheds some light on African American history. This section is reminiscent of Yagüe González’s comment on how Morrison’s fiction “giv[es] voice to previously mute individuals” (2016: 197). Looking back at her notion of ethics, at this point Palladino observes how Morrison gives the dispossessed others their own voice. This chapter provides a compelling reading of *Love*’s anonymous third-person narrator and its first-person narrator, simply known as ‘L’. Relying on classical mythology, the author observes how these two narrators provide readers with opposite perspectives and fragmented stories that need to be pieced together. In Palladino’s reading, L actually stands for Love and she can be identified with a postmodern re-figuration of Aphrodite. She sees the novel as the story of two conflicting narrative voices that embody the tensions between the past and the

present, love and hate, and the feud between the women related to the late Bill Cosey. Palladino emphasizes the key role played by female characters in *Love*, matching Gates and McKay's observation that in Morrison's fiction black women "occupy a more central role as subjects [and] the diversity of black communities [is] persistently explored" (1997: 2096).

Chapter 4 considers Toni Morrison's insistence on orality as being a central element in the African American literary tradition. This chapter follows Gates's reflections on Morrison's prose style, which experiments with spirituals and gospel music, "as well as jazz, blues, and the whole range of Black secular vernacular speech rituals and discourses" (1993: ix). *Love* emphasizes that orality is a valid way of telling stories and remembering them, in contrast to writing. This novel questions the reliability of written texts through the example of Bill Cosey's fake last will, which triggers a violent family feud. Palladino also explains that orality is an essential feature of blackness in literature, representing the connections with ancestors and the stories that were passed down from generation to generation, even by slaves who were not allowed to read and write. The author shows that this notion of oral literature is emphasized by Morrison's novels, specifically *Jazz*. Formed by several stories fragmenting the linear course of events, this novel is based on repeating patterns that give the text the rhythm of jazz music. It could be read as a written text that aspires to be oral, demanding some response from readers, so, quoting Justine Tally, Palladino concludes that *Jazz* is a "story about the ways and means of storytelling itself and the language of the narrative process" (97).

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The last two chapters in the book focus on *Beloved*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 and one of Morrison's most celebrated novels. In "The Site of Memory", she describes it as an attempt "to fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left" (1995: 93-94). The novel deals with slavery as an institution and with the traumatic memories of those who survived it. In contrast to relatively benign accounts of slavery in highly popular novels —namely Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976)—, several scholars have argued that *Beloved* "shows that wildly different forms of slavery could result simply from different masters" (Ryan 2008: 146), a point also discussed in Palladino's last two chapters. The arrival of schoolteacher and his cruel overseers results in Sethe's escaping the Sweet Home plantation and murdering her baby child. When Sethe's daughter comes back as a revenant, she represents "the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten" (Rushdy 1992: 571), an idea adopted by Palladino. Chapter 5 explores how the characters' hands are represented in *Beloved*. It displays several instances of nurturing and harmful hands. For example, Amy Denver heals Sethe with her

hands when the protagonist runs away from the plantation and tries to reach Ohio. Palladino argues that hands work as a “depository of knowledge and recollections” (115) in Morrison’s fiction. Baby Suggs’s preaching and holding hands with her black peers may serve as an illustration of collective memory for ex-slaves. The key example of violent hands is when Sethe kills Beloved, an episode that is told numerous times in the novel. Despite its brutality, Palladino reminds us that it is the protagonist’s “only way to exercise motherly love and preserve her child” (128).

Chapter 6 addresses fragmentation in Toni Morrison’s fiction, particularly in *Beloved*. Dismembered, wounded and disjointed female bodies often appear in her novels, as can be appreciated in the cases of Sethe’s scarred back and in Beloved’s head being severed by her own mother. On this issue, Morrison explained that she had read a newspaper clip about Margaret Garner’s true story and how the slave had beheaded her own child (McKay 1999: 3). Years later, Morrison saw the publication of *Beloved* as “a conscious act toward healing a painful wound” (McKay 1999: 3). The text itself is fragmented into several unnumbered chapters, resembling these wounded bodies. Palladino argues that this is a way of actively engaging readers in the making of the story; i.e. readers have to pick up the pieces, re-construct, and interpret the narrative. This point echoes Mobley’s observation that “Morrison’s text challenges the Western notion of linear time that informs American history and the slave narratives” (1993: 358).

Ethics and Aesthetics in Toni Morrison’s Fiction is an interesting addition to the study of this renowned writer’s novels. Mariangela Palladino has produced a comprehensive volume with abundant and relevant notes that, together with an up-to-date bibliography, provides a valuable resource for those concerned with the analysis of Morrison’s fiction. Nevertheless, the book lacks a closing section focusing on the conclusions reached by the author, which would have been an intriguing way of bringing together the different points made throughout the six chapters. The book gives the impression of being a collection of papers with a common thread rather than a cohesive and unified volume. However, the absence of a final section does not detract from the achievements of such a concise book, which offers compelling insights into Morrison’s fiction and can be read as an interesting addition to the debate on the black history trilogy and *Love* that may be found in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*—specifically in chapters 5 and 6—, edited by Tally in 2007.

As mentioned above, *Ethics and Aesthetics in Toni Morrison’s Fiction* is not concerned with earlier novels like *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Further research could take these into consideration. It may be revealing to analyze the interplay of Palladino’s notions of aesthetics and ethics in these earlier books since they portray

the protagonists' progression from girlhood to womanhood and are "novels of poetic realism and Gothic fables about growing up poor, black, and female in a male-dominated, white middle-class society" (Bell 1987: 270). Palladino's work could also be expanded in the future to study how Toni Morrison, in the late phase of her career, continued to find ways to express what is often unspeakable, for example in her novels *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015), which involve the representation of wounded black female bodies. It would also be interesting to study how *A Mercy* (2008) focuses on the role played by women in colonial America, given that it "traces the process of racialization that was just beginning to take root in late-seventeenth-century America as a means of rationalizing slavery" (Dubey 2010: 340). A study of this novel could be linked to the issues discussed by Palladino, since in *A Mercy* "Morrison revisits themes of her earlier work: the destruction of the family unity by slavery, mother and daughter relationships, obsessive love, degrees of freedom, the importance of community, class and race conflicts, and patriarchal dominance" (Anderson 2013: 131). For these reasons, together with the parallels between Sethe murdering Beloved and the separation of a slave mother and her child at the beginning of *A Mercy* (Jennings 2009: 646), this novel could be included in future studies, taking Palladino's thought-provoking contribution as a starting point.

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