

## ANALYSIS

*Paradise* (1998)

Toni Morrison

(1931- )

“*Paradise* in 1998 reveals Morrison at the top of the game in her post-Nobel years. While she still does not tackle successful blacks—those with rewarding careers, upward mobility, professional lives—she does combine here her three major preoccupations: community and how it evolves, gender issues, and narrative strategies. The concern with structuring, which was so apparent in *Beloved*, recurs in *Paradise*, and it solidly locates Morrison as a writer attempting something new. For in her method of structuring, however much she is indebted to Faulkner, she has made narration her own. Telling stories, personal histories, all, are molded into an historical perspective. She has transformed narrative indirection and indeterminism into an effective strategy for suggesting social and personal randomness—that is, history.

In this instance, her community is Ruby, in Oklahoma—almost in a nonplace which is identified as space in the middle of somewhere—an all-black community. It has been established by male authority as a place which displays black enterprise and autonomy; whites are kept out, as is any personal behavior which might subvert the moral values of the community. Because of this, the Convent—once a place for nuns and now a refuge for the marginalized of society—cannot be permitted to continue; its values, however humanistic and spiritualized in some matters, are condemned as inconsistent with what the male-directed Ruby wants as its ‘utopia’ or paradise.

As against the Convent is the Oven, a large assembly of bricks and mortar, which is permitted for displays of affection, dancing, partying. The point of the contrast is, apparently, that while activity in the Convent is hidden outside of time, behavior at the Oven is openly displayed. Both the Convent and the Oven, as elements of Morrison’s community, are sacred places of sorts: the Oven as part of the history of Ruby, and the Convent also as part of history and memory. As sacralized places, both reveal elements of morality: the Convent, despite its name, as evil, and the Oven, despite *its* name, as embodying acceptable Ruby values.

Inside this male-oriented and authority-driven community, the spokespersons are the Reverend Misner along with the leading elements of the community who are those with bloodlines extending backwards into black history. Morrison is really interested in revealing how the women, who live in the shadows, are the major forces in Ruby, whereas the men are energized only by resentment, male chauvinism, and blood feuds. What has happened is that the all-black community has taken on the same negative features of white communities; only the color has changed. As Morrison near the end comments: ‘A backward noplac—ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where, who had seen in lively, free, unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so got rid of them.’ On this note, the community aspect encounters the gender issue for completion.

The novel’s narrative strategies create the aura of a mystery novel, for *Paradise* begins with: ‘They shoot the white girl first,’ the white girl being Consolata, now something of a saving force intermixed with witch-like qualities. The posse of townspeople intends to kill everyone at the Convent, but the women rout the men with broomsticks, pots and pans, and a knife; and apparently flee to another life outside of Ruby. The explication of that first line becomes the grounding for the entire novel. Morrison has her way with the first lines, using the shock value of a transgressive idea as a way of introducing a mystery or at least a conundrum.

The mechanism of *Paradise* proceeds around gradual divulgence [*sic*] of information. Morrison by now has become a master of withholding and spooning out just enough information to keep her narrative going. But in *Paradise* we observe that her pacing has become glacial, more glacial than in either *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon*, her most representative fiction. The glacial quality of the narrative offers us several options:

one, obviously, to experience tedium in the way material is doled out; a second is to see that by revealing detail as a precious commodity Morrison is helping to create a community as it were brick by brick; and, finally the slow pacing allows the mystery to intensify until she can unravel it in the final pages, when Ruby, townspeople, Convent, and gender conflicts all come together in the climactic struggle that defines who and what everything is.

Along the way, Morrison lets her individual stories develop slowly, and even the relationships between characters is not clear until they begin to congregate at the Convent. As readers, we know they are doomed, or at least the one who is white is doomed, and that the Convent has been condemned as the witches of a previous era were condemned. Witchcraft, whether actual or perceived, is viewed through Morrison's eyes as a male-oriented crusade to wipe out uppity females. By identifying the doings at the Convent as satanic, the leading men of Ruby can maintain their power. Identifying women as creatures of the devil is more satisfying to the men than their looking into themselves for their own motives. The one exception may be the Reverend Misner, but he is not sufficient to halt the other nine men from trying to wipe out the blot on their town and return it to what they conceived of as paradise.

In pursuit of her ironic vision of paradise, Morrison has forged an Alexandrine prose, one perhaps, we can say, more Miltonic than any in her previous fiction. It is stately and strangely imperial for someone trying for equality and justice in community life. But whatever immediate tedium the method creates, there is little question that in the 90s Morrison has shaped her voice, distinguishing it from any other novelist. A Morrison novel has its unique sound, and this is a great achievement given the multitude of voices emanating from America's fictions. Withholding, halting, swerving, interpolating, decentering, Morrison has recreated narrative. As she focuses so intensely on black life in America it will be interesting to see if she can broaden her vision to include more successful blacks—not as American black triumphalism, but as a recognition that communities change, that young people migrate to the cities, and that American newness has rubbed off on America's minority populations.”

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*American Fictions: 1980-2000*  
(Xlibris 2001) 151-54