

REVIEW

Tar Baby (1981)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

John Irving

A novelist's vice usually resembles his virtue, for what he does best he also tends to do to excess: if he's good at being lyrical, he's too lyrical; if a cruel fate or accident seems to attend each character's childhood, that doom announces itself like a gun going off too long before the bullet's arrival. Our best and most ambitious writers indulge their vices as freely as their virtues; they are unafraid of them and think it small-minded to exercise restraint.

Thomas Hardy, for instance, much maligned for the preachy element in his prose—his instructions to mankind that intrude upon his narrative like a voice over a loudspeaker in the midst of some public crisis—chooses not to describe Tess d'Urberville's deflowering as if it affected only one victim; instead he addresses a larger injustice, which may be what many readers dislike in Hardy—especially today—but this is also what makes Hardy Hardy.

The more ambitious a novelist is, the more willing he is to elevate his characters to the level of myth—to give their births, their relationships, their deaths, even their names, the resonance of legend. Dickens conveys such ambition in his titles (*Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *Hard Times*) and of course in his characters' names (Lady Dedlock, Mr. Jaggars, Gradgrind). The 19th century novel is rich with such risk, such mischief.

Toni Morrison seems to be returning such risk and mischief to the contemporary American novel, and never more extravagantly than in *Tar Baby*, her fourth and most ambitious book. In *Song of Solomon* (1977) she gave us a hospital called Mercy Hospital, popularly called "No Mercy." That novel began with a life insurance agent leaping off the hospital roof in an attempt to fly to the other side of Lake Superior: "I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I love you all." Toni Morrison loves them all, too—all her characters in all her books. She mythologizes her characters almost as they're conceived, at least as soon as they're born, but she has the good novelist's sense of detail that makes these mythic people live. The boy born in the hospital on the day the life insurance gent fails to fly is Milkman; he's the first black baby born at No Mercy; his aunt is named Pilate, and she's born without a navel.

Miss Morrison has been up to this kind of dramatic exaggeration for some time. In *Sula* (1973) she managed to turn a poor black part of Ohio into a fairy tale (in a town called Medallion, the black people live in a place called the Bottom and celebrate National Suicide Day). The main character, Sula Peace, is such an upsetting heroine that her return to the town of Medallion is "accompanied by a plague of robins."

Now, in *Tar Baby*, Miss Morrison gives us a candy manufacturer named Valerian Street, a white man, who marries a woman he sees riding a winter carnival float holding the paw of a polar bear. She is Miss Maine, in fact, and is called the Principal Beauty of Maine. Valerian Street's best friend is a French dentist named Michelin. Valerian's own name was once used for a kind of candy that failed because nobody bought it but blacks in the South. Despite this failure, Valerian Street is a wealthy man. When we meet him he is trying to live out his last years on a Caribbean island called Isle des Chevaliers. He is still attracted to Northern flowers, however, and indulges himself with a greenhouse in which he plays music to those species that don't grow in the tropics.

Miss Morrison makes greater mischief with Valerian's paradise than simply poking fun at his flowers. He lives oblivious to a story within his own family—a story too good for me to spoil for the reader (and too awful for the frail Miss Maine to cope with). The family's loyal black cook, Ondine, will reveal the tale;

she and her husband, Sydney, the butler, has devoted most of their lives to serving Valerian Street. They are the white man's dream of 'good Negroes,' which means they love their master's child as if he were their own, they keep their place, they grow quietly and uncomplainingly old.

They also provide Miss Morrison with an opportunity to exercise her considerable gift for dialogue; this old couple's conversation is sparkling and through it the reader learns the circumstances of Valerian's retirement to the Caribbean. It is both his and his wife's sorrow that their only son won't share this paradise (the mystery of the novel, and it's a gruesome mystery, is why the son, Michael stays away). Valerian escapes from his disappointment to his greenhouse: "When he knew for certain that Michael would always be a stranger to him, he built the greenhouse as a place of controlled ever-flowering life to greet death in."

In *Tar Baby* Toni Morrison lavishes her strongest prose on descriptions of nature: "Bees have no sting on Isles des Chevaliers, nor honey. They are fat and lazy, curious about nothing. Especially at noon. At noon parrots sleep and diamondbacks work down the trees toward the cooler undergrowth. At noon the water in the mouths of orchids left there by the breakfast rain is warm. Children stick their fingers in them and scream as though scalded."

At times this effort to see the world from nature's point of view seems precious, even cute ("Margaret was not dreaming nor was she quite asleep, although the moon looking at her face believed she was"), but the richness of the best of these passages (a description of the death of a river, for example) makes Miss Morrison's excesses tolerable.

Less tolerable, however, is her excessive use of dialogue: too much of the story is told through dialogue—and not only through the old couple's conversations. Their niece, Jadine, a super-educated, super-beautiful young woman, a Paris model who "made those white girls disappear. Just disappear right off the page," has a love affair with an escaped criminal, a poor, uneducated north Florida black. This affair is the book's erotic and dramatic center. Jadine and her lover, Son (his father was called Old Man), passionately and violently debate the best way for blacks to be independent of the white man's world. Their arguments are lengthy and become tedious, but they vividly expose the novel's racial tensions.

Jadine was educated on money given her by her aunt's and uncle's employer; her friendship with Mrs. Street is severely tested by Son's intrusion (he jumps ship and swims ashore on Isle des Chevaliers, hiding in the Street family's bedrooms for four days, sneaking food, before he is caught). Son's presence reveals the racism in both the whites and blacks in the Street household; he is—in the blacks' own words—"just a swamp nigger."

What's so powerful, and subtle, about Miss Morrison's presentation of the tension between blacks and whites is that she conveys it almost entirely through the suspicions and prejudices of her black characters. It is the white world that has created this, and in the constant warring between Sydney, Ondine, and Jadine, and between Jadine and Son, Miss Morrison uncovers all the stereotypical racial fears felt by whites and blacks alike. Like any ambitious writer, she's unafraid to employ these stereotypes—she embraces the representative quality of her characters without embarrassment, then proceeds to make them individuals too.

Jadine takes Son to New York City, but after his immersion in Caribbean life he sees black Americans with the keen perspective of a foreigner: "The black girls in New York City were crying and their men were looking neither to the right nor to the left. Not because they were heedless, or intent on what was before them, but they did not wish to see the crying, crying girls split into two parts by their tight jeans, screaming at the top of their high heels, straining against the pull of their braids and the fluorescent combs holding their hair."

Son then takes Jadine back to his north Florida home, where the 'real' blacks live, but Jadine is bored and repulsed. In the end she returns to Paris, possibly to have a rich white man's child, while Son searches for her on Isle des Chevaliers—an almost atavistic figure returning to the swamp, losing himself in a powerfully superstitious island culture, radically different from the culture of black America.

Tar Baby is, of course, a black novel, a novel deeply perceptive of the black's desire to create a mythology of his own to replace the stereotypes and myths the white man has constructed for him. It is also a book about a woman's anger at—and her denial of—her need for an impossible man, and in this regard it is a woman's novel too. Leaving Son behind her, Jadine bravely concludes: "A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for." Yet Toni Morrison's greatest accomplishment is that she has raised her novel above the social realism that too many black novels and women's novels are trapped in. She succeeded in writing about race and women symbolically.

This movement from realism to myth can be seen at its best, for example, in a crucial fight between Jadine and Son: "She looked at him and when he saw the sheen gone from her minky eyes and her wonderful mouth fat with disgust, he tore open his shirt, saying, 'I got a story for you'.... Alongside the ferocity of this battle, Valerian Street's greenhouse and the problems besetting his wife (the "Bride of the Polar Bear") seem trivial in the extreme, but Miss Morrison never withholds her sympathy from her minor characters. If the excesses of the book's dialogue and lyricism are acceptable vices of ambition, the precision of Miss Morrison's minor characters and scenes reveals her craftsmanship. When she abandons that precision, it doesn't seem a lapse in her artistry so much as a way of announcing her more visceral intentions.

Some readers will find the overlapping narrative structure an irritation; this is one of the problems with Miss Morrison's dependence on dialogue to advance and fill in the story. Some readers may resist the movement toward myth in the book's deliberately symbolic ending—and some complaints, some wish to know more concretely what happens, may be justified. Will Son ever connect with Jadine again? Will Jadine allow herself to be bought by the safe, white world of Paris? And will Sydney and Ondine, despite the indignities they have been forced to suffer, continue to serve the Streets, who—at the novel's end—are devastated by the revelation of their family's inner violence?

But Toni Morrison is less interested in the final details of her characters' lives than she is interested in demonstrating the vast discrepancies between the places black people end up and the places they seek. Son chooses to lose himself in the rain forest, "where the champion daisy trees still grow," rather than give himself up to a black world that has been corrupted by whites. Son invents his own life from scratch; his almost fatal love for Jadine has only momentarily distracted him from this goal.

Thomas Hardy would have appreciated Miss Morrison's old-fashioned authorial intrusions, her wise counsel to her readers. It is an earned moment when Miss Morrison gives Valerian Street the following revelation or benediction: "At some point in life the world's beauty becomes enough...." Although Valerian has been largely innocent of the crimes in this novel visited upon blacks and whites, Miss Morrison concludes: "An innocent man is a sin before God. Inhuman and therefore unworthy. No man should live without absorbing the sins of his kind, the foul air of his innocence, even if it did wilt rows of angel trumpets and cause them to fall from their vines."

This judgment is as sympathetic as it is severe. Thomas Hardy, full of his own instructions to damaged mankind, would have loved this book."

John Irving
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