

ANALYSIS

Tar Baby (1981)

Toni Morrison

(1931-)

“‘Tar baby’ is also a name, like ‘nigger,’ that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses’ little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.”

Toni Morrison
Interview with Tom LeClair (1983)

“Each of the characters in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby* comes with a history, quite a complete history that is given to us in a series of stunning performances. Morrison has a dossier on every man and woman she admits to the sacred company of her fiction. It becomes apparent, as we read on from *Sula* to *Song of Solomon* to this fine new novel, that she feels it is not only her writerly duty but her great pleasure to give us the details of each life in a grand summation.

So with Valerian Street, an odd but reasonable man retired to Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean, we are taken back to the childhood of a rich orphan who inherits a candy company. It would have to be a candy company—the very sweetness of the enterprise works in *Tar Baby*. Valerian’s town is suffused with the smell of candy, a coating of nostalgia for all who grew up there, and the business is run with an enlightened liberalism. Though that happy empire has been left behind, we must know it and all its charms as well as its structures so that we will know why this man lives in exile in a dream house of his design. The work assigned to him is done and he is free to sit in his air-conditioned green house, Bach on the stereo, a civilized outpost in an unreal world where all the choices are of his making.

There he lives, in the house called L’Arbe de la Croix, with his ditsy wife, Margaret—the Principal Beauty of Maine. And her story, well, it’s equally wonderful: the poor girl with only her spectacular looks and all the good fortune to be riding down the street on a float holding a polar bear’s paw when Valerian passed through town. What kind of world have we entered when the Candy King chooses Miss Maine for his mate and when their house guest many years later is Jadine, an exquisite Ph.D. model, movie star, niece to the faithful black couple who attend to the Streets’ every need? A world of contrivance, a playful world that we once believed in—and for the most part in *Tar Baby* Toni Morrison makes us believe in it still.

The very flora and fauna of the island are alive, whispering, murmuring, nodding their commentary on the stories that are being played out in the dazzling sun. I know of no other landscapes in contemporary fiction that breathe like Morrison’s except perhaps the animated bush country of Patrick White’s Australia. Such exotic settings may seem magically evoked and can lend themselves to the fabulous tale.... This is both an elegant and a horrifying way for us to see the river cruelly diverted by men, but it is a risky business letting the butterflies speak and the wind pass judgment. Though it can come perilously close to Disney, the animation works most of the time in this novel to reinforce our sense of the storybook island on which the wealthy white liberals, the chic, educated black beauty, and the Uncle Toms can face each other simply.... Morrison gives us the children’s story, and just when we are most delighted, she takes it away.

To begin with, *Tar Baby* is all so much fun: the rich in the sun; the snappy talk in the servants’ quarters; the glamour of Jadine Childs, a sort of honey-colored Rosalind Russell, bored with all her success, knowing she should think seriously about herself. Then we get our hero, a big black man who’s jumped ship, young, handsome—tarnished but sterling. For some days he steals chocolate candy from the kitchen to survive, then hides in Margaret Street’s closet where she finds him ‘literally, literally a nigger in the wood pile’....

In *Tar Baby* the black fugitive is just what these feckless island people need—Jadine with her modish problem of inauthenticity, Margaret’s anxious aging, Valerian’s eccentric rule—someone to shock them out of the trivia of their days, their petty decisions, their witty conversations. At breakfast the Streets’ repartee falls halfway between Noel Coward and Strindberg. We seem to be involved not only in a tale of wonders but in a brittle comedy of manners, a smart script (many of the scenes in *Tar Baby* play beautifully). The Streets have just argued about the possibility of their sweet, alienated son coming home for Christmas when the intruder is discovered: his name is Son. There’s the added hilarity of Jadine’s edge of jealousy that the gorgeous man—thief, rapist?—who cleans up so nicely is not found crouching in *her* closet.

As the black American prince, Son charms almost everyone in sight, but the tone of the novel changes. It is grown-up time. Given a son, a love, an adversary, the slick surface at L’Arbe de la Croix is scraped away. Personal history gives way to confession. The bickering games between husband and wife, servant and master, become confrontations. It is revealed that the battle for the soul of Street’s son began when he was an infant and that Margaret was guilty of the most primitive torture, while Ondine, the black cook, protected the boy—her missionary work among the aborigines. But nothing is black and white (or the reverse) in *Tar Baby*, as the fable dissolves. Valerian and Margaret gain a reality: he is dazed by the guilt of his past innocence; she is shriven, competent, and tenderly ministering to her husband in his decline. Though Sydney and Ondine, the old-fashioned ‘live-in’ couple, do not change their roles (they cannot), there is a shift in power and the black servants’ final dialogues with Valerian are menacing, Pinteresque.

Meanwhile, and it is a decidedly melodramatic meanwhile, Jadine and Son have escaped to New York, there to make love grandly, to begin new lives. I don’t believe in their idyll. Perhaps I am supposed to know it’s too good to be true, absolutely doomed. Jadine with her worldly credentials cannot live with a poor farm boy from Florida. Here I think Morrison depends heavily on an elevated prose, an incantation that insists upon the lovers’ passionate union and later upon their equally passionate parting. In one sense they are talked about too much; in another they simply talk too much. Son and Jadine come at each other like running commentaries on black men and black women, on education, debt, freedom. It is the only dull part of this serious and mostly entertaining novel.

The *longueur* of the love story is relieved by a nicely rendered interlude set in Son’s hometown, Eloë. Jadine among the hicks in her cashmere sweater and Charrel boots is a touching sight. The stifling little shacks are more foreign to her than the hotel-like splendor of L’Arbe de la Croix. The perfect couple become an unlikely pair. Of course, we cannot help but see that their problems are real and at times their invective cuts deep.... It is true that Son romanticizes the poor and the ignorant and all the soothing sacrificial black women of his past that Jadine can never be. But he is right, too, when he rails at her: ‘And you? Where have you lived? Anybody ask you where you come from, you give them five towns. You’re not *from* anywhere. I’m from Eloë.’ And he is right again when he begins to taunt her, instructively, with the story of ‘Tar Baby.’

Thematically, this novel is much tighter than Morrison’s earlier works. Except for the love affair, which seems to me rhetorical and overstated, the stories do not meander or pull away from the central vision of a modern world that offers the thinness of exile and denies us the comforts of home. Valerian believes that his son was ‘a typical anthropologist, a cultural orphan who sought other cultures he could love without risk of pain.’ It is not easy to belong anywhere and we cannot be daughters and sons in the old style. Michael Street, the off-stage boy, for all the abuse done him, makes it into an independent, perhaps even a good and useful, life, but Jadine, for all her pampering, goes back to Europe with the belief that she must be as tough and hard as a soldier ant....

The very end of this novel, like the finale of *Song of Solomon*, reverts to fable. In his pursuit of Jadine, Son is taken by an island woman, not to the Streets’ dock, but to the dangerous shores of Isle des Chevaliers, where it is said men run naked and blind. ‘Choose them,’ the woman says—as opposed to the impossibilities of an mature life with Jadine. The land seems to receive him... I can only presume that this storybook language means that Son is swallowed up in that childish world of magic, returned to a natural state. Sadly, the black hero perpetuates the myth.

Morrison is easy in her pursuit of big themes: the mutual responsibility of parents and children, the debts we must pay in order to gain a validity and those we must walk away from in order to gain freedom. And, of course, her talent for the comic serves her well in dealing with blacks and whites, maids and masters—drawing the ironic parallels between private and cultural guilt that must haunt us all. For all the fantasy in *Tar Baby*, it is a highly realistic novel, full of the actual riddles, the unanswerable questions, of our present lives. The solutions that tie the Streets and their black servants to a crumbling dream house are hardly soothing. For *Jadine and Son*, there are no clear answers, only Morrison's observation of their difficult human choices.

Despite its meandering commentaries, despite some stylistic excesses, this is an admirable novel. Witty and desperate, for the most part *Tar Baby* is as carefully patterned as a well-written poem. As I unwind the thematic strands in this review, I realize that much of my pleasure has been in construing this moving and intricate plot, a pleasure I associate with the best kind of reading. *Tar Baby* is a good American novel in which we can discern a new lightness and brilliance in Toni Morrison's enchantment with language and in her curiously polyphonic stories that echo life."

Maureen Howard
The New Republic
(21 March 1981)

"The tar baby of southern black folklore is reputed to haunt dark woods and entrap unsuspecting children... 'it was said to be impossible to pass the tar-baby without striking it... and when once you had struck it, you were lost.' The tar baby of Toni Morrison's new novel is a young, dirty southern black male fugitive called Son. One Christmas season he invades the Caribbean paradise inhabited by Valerian and Margaret Street (a white retired candy manufacturer and his wife), Sydney and Ondine Childs (their black servants), and Jadine Childs (the Streets' protégé and Sydney's niece). Although the Streets and the Childs are repelled by him, they cannot avoid his 'touch.' Their contact with him forces them to acknowledge secrets about themselves that they had previously ignored. Once they embrace the truth that lies beneath their surface complacency they cannot let it go.

Valerian has always remained unsullied by life. He retired young to avoid becoming an industrial nuisance.' After divorcing his first wife he married Margaret, a teenaged beauty queen, because his 'youth lay in her red whiteness.' He built himself a magnificent home, L'Arbe de la Croix, on his Caribbean island where he could 'sleep the deep brandy sleep he deserved.' And now he spends his days in the adjacent greenhouse surrounded by his most-loved plants and music. Twenty years Valerian's junior, Margaret is not yet willing to share his self-imposed exile. She spends six months of each year at home in Philadelphia and urges him to return to the States to live. Valerian retaliates against her badgering by reminding her of her 'ignorance and origins.' Margaret is still a beauty, but she lacks his sophistication.

As Sydney often boasts, he and Ondine are 'Philadelphia Negroes.' Like Margaret they would rather be back home, but they have reconciled themselves to the tranquillity of the island. The value their security and their employer's generosity, since Valerian has Sorbonne-educated their niece and provided for their future by giving them stock each Christmas: 'Stock. No slippers. Stock!' Orphaned at the age of ten, Jadine is the center of her aunt's and uncle's life. Recently featured on the cover of *Elle*, pursued by 'three count three gorgeous...men,' and almost finished with a doctorate in art history, Jadine spends this particular Christmas at L'Arbe de la Croix deciding whether to marry the most 'exciting and smart and fun and sexy' of her suitors.

When the novel opens, the family awaits futilely the homecoming of Michael, the Streets' son. In his absence they entertain an unanticipated guest instead. A horrified Margaret discovers Son (appropriately named) in the closet, and Valerian invites him to stay for the holidays. The jarring presence of this outsider provokes the Streets and the Childses to display the profound emotions they customarily hide. Valerian's graciousness toward Son makes the elder Childses realize that they have never been treated as his equals. Angered by one of Valerian's decisions, at Christmas dinner Ondine reveals a secret she has concealed for twenty years: that Margaret abused Michael as a child. This disclosure forces Valerian to realize that he has refused to see his son's suffering in order to maintain his own naivete. And Margaret acknowledges the extremes to which she was driven by the boredom of her days as a young wife and mother.

Son has an equally profound impact on Jadine, with whom he enjoys a passionate affair. A country boy from Eloë, Florida, Son takes Jadine home with him to show her the superficiality of her cosmopolitan values. But as he cannot tolerate her rootless New York life, she cannot understand his people. In Eloë she is haunted by images of the substantial women of her past. Even after she leaves him, she never escapes her fear that she is inferior to these 'night women.' Like Morrison's last book, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* is about the need to reconcile oneself to one's history. Ondine tells Jadine late in the novel that she must learn to be a daughter, 'a woman that cares about where she came from and takes care of them that took care of her.' Indeed, the proliferation of parent/child imagery underscores the fact that in the world of the novel no one knows himself until he explores and accepts his past.

Tar Baby is the most ambitious of Morrison's works. Besides presenting a wider range of characters, she weaves a richer mythic fabric into this novel than she did in the others. The imagery she uses to animate the local history and landscape occasionally rings false: 'Fish heard [the clouds] hooves as they raced off to carry the news of the scatterbrained river to the peaks of hills and the tops of champion daisy trees.' But the deft characterization, flawless ear for dialogue, and free play of imagination that one expects from Morrison are as evident here as they are in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song*. *Tar Baby* is a provocative, complex, and exciting novel by an exceedingly gifted contemporary author."

Valerie A. Smith
Sewanee Review 89.4 (Fall 1981)

"The promotion of *Tar Baby* was a stunning show. For a book that promised to be not just a good read for this season but Literature of Lasting Value, the Madison Avenue machinery spun into high gear. Certain book stores displayed signed advance copies: trade edition and the illustrated Franklin, leather-bound; key publications featured front page coverage, full reviews (the *New York Times* reviewed it twice), and interviews. 'I can't believe *Newsweek* will have a middle-aged colored woman on its cover,' said Morrison. Yet there she was, posing between readings, guest spots on television, book parties. For a shining moment she was the toast of the literary world. And—never mind that nobody in the subway seemed to have put down the usual romance and mysteries for *Tar Baby*—the books were *selling*: by August *Tar Baby* was selling out its sixth edition. When it appears in paperback, it will, one supposes, take the next step toward permanence in the Lasting Value market place of Faulkners and Ellisons: it will be taught in universities; it will attract scholarly attention.

All this hyping puts pressure on the scholar in the field of black literature. But what is the book's real value? I found it to contain a sheaf of images and scenes not quickly to be forgotten. Like a pretty and intricate geometric design and proof, *Tar Baby* is often very intriguing. Yet I also found *Tar Baby* deeply flawed: somehow it has all the makings of a good novel; what's missing is the spark of life that makes a good novel not a formula but vibrant art.

Essentially, *Tar Baby* is the story of Jadine Childs and Son Green. 'Jade' is a green-eyed Negro woman of fair complexion who, at twenty-five, has squeezed much ritzy living into her years. High fashion model, painter, actress, graduate of the Sorbonne, Jadine was born in black Baltimore but escaped with her guardians, Uncle Sydney Childs and Aunt Ondine Childs, to the Caribbean island of Dominique. Back in Baltimore, Sydney and Ondine had worked as butler and maid for Valerian Street; when Valerian moved to the West Indies he took them and fifteen-year-old Jadine, with him. Not long afterwards, Valerian met and married Margaret Street; she looked so much like one of the candies from which he'd made his fortune. Their son, Michael, grew up in Dominique, at 'L'Arbe de la Croix,' the big house that both the Streets and the Childses call home.

Set in the seventies, the novel begins when Jadine is home from Europe for Christmas. In the midst of a longstanding squabble with Valerian, Margaret runs to her room, opens her closet door and screams: a black man, Son Green, is there in the dark, hiding. Son is a Floridian who had jumped ship and stowed away at 'L'Arbe de la Croix' for several days. Sleeping in closets by day and roaming the house and grounds by night, hunting for food, Son has come to feel comfortable in the place. In part to irritate Margaret and the Childses, Valerian lets Son stay on. Not having 'seen a Black like him in ten years,' Jadine is rankled at first, and then interested. She and Son make love and take off for New York City. But after a visit to Son's villagelike hometown, Eloë, and after a particularly wracking clash back in New York,

Jadine leaves Son, returns to Dominique, and then to Paris with her white lover, Ryk. Bepuzzled, and one step behind in Dominique, Son is left to figure out the meaning of the brief encounter with 'Jade.'

In this novel of classic confrontation between the 'bourgeois' black woman and the 'downhome' black man, some of the most passionate writing emerges from passages concerning the meaning of blackness. As in Ellison's novel, here 'blackness is...and it ain't'; 'it ain't,' for one thing, easy to reduce to a few easy terms. Jadine just wants to be *herself*, and 'was uncomfortable with the way Margaret stirred her into blackening up or universalizing out, always alluding to or ferreting out what she believed were racial characteristics. She ended by resisting both, but it kept her alert about things she did not wish to be alert about'.... But then there's the tense and wonderful portrait of Eloë, Son's all-black homeplace that looked to Jadine not like a town at all, more like a single block in Queens. With Son gone off to talk with his father, Jadine hunched behind her camera and tried to get a fix on these Eloë dwellers, also part of Morrison's huge and varied cavalcade of Afro-Americans....

Back in Isle de la Chevaliers, and through with Son and his backwater dreams and his contempt for her striving after social advancement, Jadine gets ready to take off for Paris. But before she can get away, Ondine tries to tell Jadine that she still needs to learn that being a good black woman involves being a good daughter. 'Jadine,' she tells her niece, 'a girl has got to be a daughter first. And if she never learns how to be a daughter, she can't never learn how to be a woman. I mean a real woman: a woman good enough for a child; good enough for a man—good enough even for the respect of other women.... You don't need your own natural mother to be a daughter. All you need is to feel a certain way, a certain careful way about people older than you.' But of course Jadine, who 'has forgotten her ancient properties,' misunderstands, thinks her aged aunt wants 'parenting,' that Ondine's idea of womanness is too restricting.

Morrison's unfailing ear for talk, and her willingness to let her novel not just delight but teach, give these passages distinction. Yet the novel's greatest achievement, I believe, is its effective orchestration of the 'Tar Baby' folkstory. 'In this novel,' wrote Morrison in the Preface to the Franklin edition, 'I did not retell that story and, needless to say, I did not improve it, I fondled it scratched it and pressed it with my fingertips as one does the head and spine of a favorite cat—to get at the secret of its structure without disturbing its mystery.' Made popular among nonblacks by Joel Chandler Harris and Walt Disney, the 'Tar Baby' story is an African-American folktale with many variants collected in West Africa and in American black communities.... As such it makes for an effective subtext in a novel concerned, as this one is, with 'the blackness of blackness.'

Son accuses Jadine of being a kind of Tar Baby, a tricky white man's creation set to waylay black men whose real home is down in the brier patch.... This works as one key into the mystery of this novel: Son is Brer Rabbit in the farmer's patch, Jadine the dressed up Tar Baby... At the novel's end he is loosed from her grasp and runs: 'lickety-lickety-lickety-split.' Jadine—the twenty-five-year-old model whom the agencies make up to look like a nineteen-year-old with 'the eyes and mouth of a woman of three decades'—traps Son with her sophisticated beauty. 'He knew that any moment she might...press her dreams of gold and cloisonné and honey-colored silk into him—and then who would mind the pie table in the basement of the church?'...

If Jadine is Tar Baby-like, so is the beautiful African woman in Paris, the woman with 'skin like tar,' who spat 'an arrow of saliva' in Jadine's direction: the woman in a yellow dress who carried three white eggs and who seemed to personify something crucial and valuable about women and the black tradition. This African woman with 'tar-black fingers' mocks Jadine's career successes (in something like the way Invisible Man's grandfather spoils his successes) and haunts her dreams. She appears in Jadine's Eloë nightmare in which a group of black women, including Jadine's mother and Ondine, point their breasts accusingly at the wayward daughter, 'Jade.' They could 'impugn your character,' these 'diaspora mothers,' just as the African woman with a single glance 'could discredit your elements.' Here we are left to wonder if Jadine does not fail to become, in the richest sense, a 'Tar Baby,' a black woman; a true daughter of the woman with skin like tar, with elements strong enough to hold not only one man but a people's traditions.

As a bearer of traditions, Son is also Tar Baby-like: a trickster of many names, a piano player and a folktale spinner. Son dreams not of high times in international cities but of Eloë, where his sacred

memories include cleaning a tub of fresh fish for a precious dime, and minding the hot homemade pies in the basement of the church. Planted secretly in Jadine's bedroom, Son tries to instill in her his dream of 'yellow houses with white doors which women opened and shouted Come on in, you honey you!' Not having washed for days, he was afraid his odor would wake her before he had time to 'breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiney consistency.' Here Son, the immature wanderer whom Jadine calls a 'big old country baby,' is the silent figure of tar hoping to capture the world traveler and take her home to blackness.

Morrison is playing with the Tar Baby story, 'riffing on it'...to suggest a complex human situation. Both Jadine and Son are black inheritors of the Tar Baby story, and both see themselves as pulling the other from a sticky place, but, as the novel's narrator tells us, 'this rescue was not going very well'.... The subjects Morrison raises here are major ones, and unconfined to one race of people. One central aesthetic question is, How does spoken narrative relate to written narrative? When a folktale as stubbornly complicated as the 'Tar Baby' story is a subtext, the writer must convert higher algebra into even higher calculus. This Morrison does, with an unstoppable voice that is compellingly her own. The novel fails, however, to bring these folk-characterlike figures to life. Finally, we do not care about Jade or Son, and their tiresome musings, for they seem stillborn. Stuck to each other or unstuck, these tar babies stir our minds but not—and here is the crucial test for all art—our deepest emotions. The novel is selling well, and I believe it will teach well, but for sheer storytelling that seems utterly uncontrived and lively, one must go to Morrison's better novels: *Sula* and the masterful *Song of Solomon*."

Robert G. O'Meally
"Tar Baby, She Don' Say Nothin'"
Callaloo 4.1-3
(February-October 1981) 193-98

"The quick brushstroke that opens *Tar Baby* introduces Son, the Brer Rabbit of the story, and outlines, by suggestion, the details of the earlier tale in which the rabbit, foraging for food, enters the fenced-in garden-world of Farmer Brown, the self-appointed keeper of the bounty of the world. Having been introduced in the first six pages, a prologue to the novel, Son, though we are ever conscious of his presence, does not reappear for eighty more pages, during which we learn the ways of Farmer Brown. This re-created Farmer Brown of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* is called Valerian Street.... Valerian, a farmer, was Roman emperor from A.D. 253 to 260. In *Tar Baby*, Valerian Street is a retired, resigned, no longer vigorous or forceful industrialist.... Son, like the rabbit, has inadvertently entered the bounteous garden-world of Farmer Brown, emperor of abundance. The collision-encounter between Son and the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix and the outgrowth of that form the heart of the tale told in *Tar Baby*....

Like Pauline Breedlove of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Ondine and Sydney work hard, are reliable, aim to please and do. Unlike Pauline, they do not shoo away their niece, Jadine, as Pauline shoos away her daughter, Pecola, in order to lavish attention upon the blue-eyed child of the family she serves, yet Ondine and Sydney give Jadine over to Valerian and Margaret, who guide her choices and mold her ways and steer her thinking in the manner in which they wish to guide and mold and steer their own son, Michael, who rejects them.... *Tar Baby* is about a woman, Jadine, who, disconnected from the life potential of her origins, has lost the crucial is-ness of her tribe. 'She has forgotten her ancient properties'.... She is, perhaps, an unwilling Delilah sucking at the Samson strength of Son. But more and more terribly, Jadine is the embodiment in language of the carcinogenic disease eating away at the ancestral spirit of the race at the present time. It is that disease at which the pen-knife of Toni Morrison cuts....

Unlike Valerian, Son is not guilty of the crime of unseasonal innocence—a state of spiritual ignorance and vacuity, self-barricaded willfulness, allowing only what one desires to pass for what is. Son, born and raised in Eloie, Florida, knows both the briar patch and the fruit of life.... Son is not an ignorant man; he is, like Guitar of *Song of Solomon*, a bedazzled man. Bedazzlement in a world of storm is a common malady afflicting the best of men. The 'big white fog' hanging curtainlike over such a world creates illusions that pass for reality. Guitar of *Song of Solomon*, like Bigger Thomas of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, enraged by the deluge of bad ideas that afflicts his world, attempts to murder the deluded. But to rid the land of the deluded is itself an illusion—a bedazzlement.... Son, the Brer Rabbit of *Tar Baby*, sees in Jadine the appearance of something real. He is bedazzled."

Eleanor W. Traylor
“The Fabulous World of Toni Morrison: *Tar Baby*”
Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women
eds. Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Amina Baraka
(Quill 1983) 333-52

“In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison makes use of the same dialectic of dominant culture and folk experience, but does so in a more complex fashion. Unlike her other works, this novel personifies the culture in the two characters of Valerian and Margaret Street. One purpose seems to be to dramatize the sexually differential effects of the culture on those who wield its power. Another difference is the division of the middle character into two parts: Son and Jadine. In this way it is possible to have both success and failure in achieving insight. Finally, the setting is not the American Midwest and South, but an isolated Caribbean island, Isle des Chevaliers. Though all the major characters are American, the setting is useful in clarifying the effects of the dominant order on personality. Separated from the context of American society, the Americanness of the characters, especially in regard to race, can be more directly observed. The inclusion of native black characters serves not merely as counterpoint but also to suggest a broader sense of Afro-American folk experience.

Isle des Chevaliers is a perverse Eden. Valerian Street, a wealthy American candy manufacturer, purchased it years earlier and gradually built it into a clean, sterile paradise for himself and the few white families to whom he sold some of the land. He has created a carefully controlled environment, but primeval Nature constantly threatens to reassert its authority, as is suggested by repeated personifications of butterflies, trees, flowers, and the land itself. Valerian, who has retired from his inherited business, has brought with him to the island his wife, a former beauty queen; two black servants, Sydney and Ondine; and Jadine, the niece of the blacks. Also present are two native workers, known as Yardman and Mary because no one has bothered to learn their real names. Two elements trouble this paradise. One, an absence, is Michael, the son that Margaret perpetually believes will return but who never in fact makes an appearance. Valerian, who considers her an obsessively protective mother, can rather easily handle the absence until he learns the horrifying history of the mother-child relationship.

The other disruption is an intrusive presence in the form of Son, a black seaman who has jumped ship. Though Valerian tries to naturalize this alien influence by in effect making Son a surrogate for Michael, he is ultimately devastatingly unsuccessful. Son is a traditional figure in black history and lore, the fugitive from an unfair system; but he has reversed the journey of runaway slaves by escaping south to the plantation and its white patriarchy, loyal blacks, and tragic mulatto. He has many identities, but he very quickly learns the true names and relationships of everyone else, including the natives. The responses to his intrusion reveal the natures and insecurities of the residents. Margaret, in whose closet he is found, has the southern white woman's rape fantasy (even though she is from Maine); she believes that a strange black man would be in a white woman's room only because he intends to sexually assault her.

Sydney and Ondine, being proper ‘Philadelphia Negroes,’ see in Son a threat to the racial respectability they have achieved. Though they are servants, they have taken on middle-class values, and being black, they feel contaminated by anyone of their race who does not uphold the image they have created. Valerian, considering himself in total control, experiences no fear; he invites Son into the group, confident that his patronizing liberalism will neutralize any threat. The response of Jadine is the most complex, for she blends together elements of the others. A sensual woman, she is both terrified and fascinated with the sexual energy of Son: she both fears and invites rape. Having an even more refined aura of respectability than her relatives, she is repulsed by his unkempt appearance, uncouth behavior, and lack of education. And yet, like her benefactor, she wants to be in control of situations and people; Son provides an opportunity to test her manipulative skills.

These conditions and personalities set up the double quest that structures the book. Jadine's is epitomized by an African woman she has seen in Paris.... Later, when the woman leaves the grocery, she pauses outside the door and spits on the sidewalk. In this image is all that Jadine wants: racial pride, arrogance, power in the white world yet disdain for it. In her present world, power and race are divided into the characters of Valerian and Son, and she seeks what each has. But the quests are as separate as the

men, and her struggle is to unite them. On the other hand, Son wants beauty and blackness, which are characterized for him by Jadine and the native woman Therese. In Jade he sees pulchritude, intelligence, and sophistication, all things not previously available to him. In Therese, he discovers the powerful though subterranean forces of his race.

Jade and Son serve as tar babies for each other. Their contact with each other and the attachment of each to what the other represents denies them the freedom to pursue the goal which is truest for each of them. Ultimately, Morrison establishes a hierarchy of values that sees Son's freedom as success and Jadine's as failure. The hierarchy is based on what is earned by each character, in the sense that the struggle with the tar baby either does or does not force the character to confront and work through the truth of the self and history. The hierarchy, which is an inversion of surface realities, can be seen in the personifications of the opposed goals of Jade and Son free themselves for.

Valerian, the model of Jadine's pursuit of power, was named for an emperor and had a candy bar named after him. The bar, a pink and white confection, was successful only in black neighborhoods, while white boys thought its mane and color vaguely homosexual. The family provided Valerian with everything, including a good wife when the time came. Deciding that he would not have the same obsession with the company that his relatives had, he used some of his income to purchase Isle des Chevaliers as a place of retirement and escape. When his first marriage did not work out, he discovered Margaret, Miss Maine, whom he loved in large part because her complexion reminded him of his candy bar. When Jadine was orphaned, Valerian financed her education and early modeling career as a favor to Sydney and Ondine. He created, in effect, a perfect patriarchal system, with everyone created in his own image. Despite flaws in the order, such as Michael's absence and Margaret's mental aberrations, Valerian considered himself a successful deity.

But like his candy bar, his world was an insubstantial confection. One of his eccentric schemes, to have the servants join the family for Christmas dinner, backfires when Ondine, in a moment of stress, reveals Margaret's compulsion as a young mother to abuse Michael with sharp pins and lighted cigarettes. This history destroys Valerian, not because of its horror, but because it exposes his arrogant innocence and impotence. Because he refused to see Margaret and Michael as other than his creations, he could not see the depth of human frustration and suffering implied by such behavior. What he has always taken as his wife's stupidity was in fact the expression of her guilt, a guilt that makes her totally other and thus beyond his control. His power has been an unearned one, and it therefore destroyed by concrete reality. At the end of the novel, he sits in a chair mumbling, while Sydney feeds him and Margaret runs the house.

In Therese we find a very different blindness, one that is both literal and magical. Repeatedly, she and other characters refer to her failing eyesight, but this is compensated for by her ability to see what others cannot. For example, she knows of Son's presence days before Margaret finds him. She names him the chocolate-eater and thus predicts his ultimate commitment to his color rather than Valerian's. She sees the past as well as the present and future: she is said to be one of the blind race, for whom the Isle des Chevaliers is named.... Therese believes Son to be one of the race; what she does not see is that he must be enslaved before he can become one of the blind and free.

Valerian and Therese are the polarities between which Jade and Son will move. And they are interacting polarities even though they have no contact with each other. Therese defines herself in part over against the white world, both that of the Valerian Streets who dominate Caribbean life and the white slave masters who originally brought her race to the islands. And Valerian carves his empire out of and against the world of the black natives; he judges his power in part by his ability to keep natural growth out of his palace and his intellectual superiority by his ability to dismiss such folk history as the blind horsemen. Morrison does not arrange parallel movements between these poles for Son and Jadine. Rather, she has each move between a pole and that in the other which resembles the opposite pole. Thus Son literally and figuratively alternates between Therese and those sophisticated qualities in Jade that she shares with Valerian.

Jadine stands at a crossroads: she has received her advanced degree in art history and has achieved substantial success as a model in Europe. As a consequence of the latter, a wealthy European has asked to marry her. She comes to the island to make a choice without interference. Her choices, however, are all

within the realm of white society, consistent with the values taught her by Ondine and Sydney and the opportunities provided her by Valerian. The costs of such values are indicated in her childhood memory of Baltimore after her first encounter with Son. She remembers female dogs being in heat and willing to be mounted by males in the middle of the street.... She has ordered and defined her life by a firm control of sexual desire. She has equated sexuality with animality and desire with exploitation and has chosen to make herself into a gemstone rather than a woman. But Son disturbs her order.... Eventually, his sheer physical beauty, obvious desire for her, and 'savannahs in his eyes,' which suggest an African nobility, compel her to loosen the reins.

After the Christmas revelations make the Street house unbearable, the two of them go to New York, which in its modernity and sophistication is her natural territory. Here the influence of Valerian becomes clear as she seeks to remake Son into her image of the African prince, which is ultimately the only way she can accept him. Mutual affection for a time disguises this manipulative impulse, and because he loves her, he does not resist the education, the parties, and the pretensions. Finally, after a visit to his home, a Florida village she finds unbearably provincial, she realizes that he will always be a native Son, never an African prince, and she leaves him to return to her European suitor.

She rejects not merely him but her own Afro-American heritage and her blackness, the first represented by Florida and the latter by the Caribbean islands. She chooses the fixed life of white values, which are repeatedly associated with death, to the uncertainties of her race, which Morrison consistently associates with life and nature. Moreover, she chooses in effect to be a creation rather than a creator, an art historian rather than artist, a model rather than designer, a wife rather than woman. Thus, the very choice to have a clearly defined identity denies her access to origins and thus negates the very thing she seeks.

For Son, the struggle is much harder because he works from absence toward and finally away from presence. His values are not dominant, his identity is not fixed, his origin is ambiguous.... What marks Son and others like them is their refusal to participate in those social orders which categorize and systematize; they create identities by deliberately evading the conventional markers of identity—family, job, education, religion, politics—and they equate this evasion with life. In Son's case, the absence of positive identity literally keeps him from imprisonment since he was responsible for the death of his wife. Jade tempts him from his world of uncertainty and anonymity by offering visible signs of success: education, money, herself as physical presence and as actual the picture of elegance: in their first encounter, Son is enthralled by photographs of her printed in a Paris fashion magazine. Just as she sees in him a primitive energy to be channeled into civilization, so he sees in her sophisticated beauty in need of passion. In New York he realizes his ambition as long as she is willing to center her existence on him. But once she moves out into her world and tries to take him with her, he begins again to feel the impingement of the documented world.

He tries to overcome this by taking her to Florida, back to his origins, where the name Son has meaning because his father is called Old Man. But the language of this world is one she refuses to understand, seeing it as an alien culture unworthy of her interest. Blackness, so appealing when mediated by Son's beauty, is unattractive in its ordinary folk form of uneducated people, sexual circumspection, and the clothes of working people rather than fashion models. Most disturbing is Son's at-homeness in this world and his ability to love it and her simultaneously. This capacity for inclusion is one she lacks precisely because she, like Sydney and Ondine and Valerian before her, has created her visible and positive identity by excluding such blackness, by making this reality an invisibility and negation. But that very act renders it an ever-present, intolerable part of her existence. Son, who loves both beauty and blackness, and in fact sees them as a totality, cannot understand her need to escape this black village.

Back in New York, the conflict reaches a climax, as each of them assumes the role of savior....The inability to achieve resolution is fundamentally an insistence by both on an origin that can be made present. Each in effect denies history: Son by believing in the possibility of returning to a prewhite black purity and Jadine by assuming that blackness was merely an aberration from the truth of Eurocentric progress. But Morrison makes it clear that Jadine's is the greater flaw. She must turn Son into an abstraction; her love is totalitarian and cannot incorporate the differences that are part of his concrete being. When he will not submit, she goes to the island, then to Paris to her wealthy European.

He comes, on the other hand, to realize that his love must assume difference; because of this, he leaves, returns, and then pursues her back to the Caribbean. This very gesture makes possible his rite of passage, for it brings his experience into the realm of folk experience in the sense that he cannot have that which he most needs to live, yet must go on living nonetheless. He goes to Therese, thinking she will help get back Jadine, but she knows better the meaning of his return. She deceives him by letting him believe he is going to Valerian's house, but in fact lets him off on the part of the island inhabited by the blind horsemen: 'The men. The men are waiting for you'... Fearful and unable to see, he stumbles over the rocks at first.... Then he ran.... *Tar Baby* marks the final step of immersion into the black folk world. Son achieves his truest nature by becoming one, not with the tellers of tales, as in Ellison, Gaines, and Walker, but with the tales themselves. Like the horsemen, he has been blinded by the prospect of enslavement, but also like them, this very handicap gives him freedom and power. He does not go back to the womb, as Jadine thought, but into the domain of the true black man.

Significantly, such a conclusion is only possible in a magical fictional world, one which in some ways mirrors the submerged Afro-American world of voodoo, conjure, and tricksters. Morrison takes as ordinary experience what more realistic black writers assume to be fantastic....taking for granted that what is considered irrational is in fact only a perversion of the natural order by a mechanistic, oppressive social system... Thus, for the author of *Tar Baby*, the sight of the blind, the magical power of the impotent, and the spiritual vitality of nonhuman nature makes greater sense than the insanities, grotesqueries, and ironies of the realm of 'normality' and order. The particular dialectical structure of her work serves to develop the interrelated irrationalities of white and black culture."

Keith E. Byerman
"Beyond Realism: The Fictions of Toni Morrison"
*Fingering the Jagged Grain:
Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction*
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"*Tar Baby* employs the idea of a necessary fall more explicitly than any of her other works, though all her novels examine the theme.... Morrison avoids simply grafting white myth onto the black experience by excluding whites, or at least focusing 'attention not on the white characters' forcing of mythic rites...but on black characters' choices within the context of oppression.' *Tar Baby* to some degree challenges the thesis for it includes whites as central figures in the action. In developing these characters Morrison seemingly makes the mythic frame of the work more inclusive than that undergirding the earlier novels with their exclusively black characters and settings, although all the novels to some degree treat the primal theme of the Fall. To be sure *Tar Baby* is still, finally, a 'black' novel in that it portrays the protagonist Jadine's quest to recover her black identity in a decadent white culture....

It incorporates the contemporary 'black' experience in a larger, traditional myth. It gains universality in its inherited Fall pattern, the movement from a spurious garden state through confrontation with a serpent emanating from the self, to a frightening self-awareness, to expulsion and its consequences. As Valerian Street, the major white character, observes with pointed accuracy, 'something in the crime of innocence' can paralyze the human spirit. However devastating, only the loss of innocence can lead to selfhood and an existentially earned freedom.... The setting in *Tar Baby* explicitly parallels the lost Garden of Eden. It is a wealthy Caribbean estate where a retired Philadelphia candy manufacturer, Valerian Street, lives with his much younger wife, Margaret, and his two long-time black servants, Sydney and Ondine.

Visiting is Jadine, Sydney and Ondine's beautiful niece, whom they have raised. A fashionable Paris model, she has been educated at the Sorbonne with Valerian's money and has spent most of her time in Paris or New York among aesthetes and the wealthy, including a rich white man who wants to marry her. The small community of expensive winter homes had been built by Haitian laborers and constructed above a swamp called Sein de Veilles, witch's tit. Valerian's house, L'Arbe de la Croix, is the most impressive of these isolated homes. The locals tell a story of one-hundred blind, black horsemen, descendants of slaves who swam from a sinking French slave ship carrying horses. Their free progeny are said to inhabit the island, and local blacks believe they still ride horses over the hills: 'They learned to ride through the rain forest avoiding all sorts of trees and things.... They race each other, and for sport they sleep with the swamp women in Sein de Veilles.' On the edge of this mysterious realm, Valerian Street retreats to his

greenhouse where he listens to classical music and reads plant catalogues, trying to evade a modern world of 'disorder and meaninglessness.' Yet even after three years his house has a 'tentativeness.' Valerian's greenhouse, with its artificially grown hydrangea, becomes a specious garden; the house itself, built above the ruins of a once idyllic land, has 'a hotel feel about it.'

Here, Morrison has remarked, characters have no 'escape routes that people have in a large city.... No police to call.... No close neighbors to interfere.' Here, she goes on to say, the characters are 'all together in a pressure cooker...a kind of Eden.' Those living in this paradise bring with them the evidence of their own flawed humanity. And they await the serpent who somehow can force them to confront themselves, can make them see the truth that could set them free from their spiritual incapacity.

Enter Son. Like Guitar Bains or Sula, he threatens the tenuous peace and harmony of the already flawed world. The serpent in paradise is a black outlaw, a fugitive who...first appears at night emerging from the waters of the unconscious self. Son hides out in a ship where Jadine and Margaret first appear in then novel. When they land and depart by jeep, he follows them to the estate. He secretly enters the house, partly from hunger, partly because it looks 'cool and civilized.' After several days he ventures upstairs 'out of curiosity' and feels enraptured when he sees the sleeping Jadine, symbol of refinement and civilization. The house ironically becomes his 'nighttime possession' in which he roams as a shadow figure of each character's undiscovered self.

Once he is found out, he seeks acceptance like Beast in the legendary tale of Beauty and the Beast: he showers, struggles to tame his wild hair, and tries to be worthy of Jadine, his Beauty. Suggestively, Valerian compares him with Michael, his own alienated son who always promises to visit but never does, for reasons that surface later. Though it is always Margaret who insists that Michael will return because he loves her so much, it is Valerian who feels most sorrowful when his son does not return. When Son is first discovered hiding in Margaret's closet, all the others express outrage at his being there, but Valerian finds himself defending Son, welcoming him, in part as Michael's surrogate and in part as just contempt for Jadine, Sydney, and Ondine's condemnation of another black.

The arrival of a criminal in the garden sends the characters scurrying to protect their innocence. Sydney, who prides himself on being 'one of those Philadelphia Negroes,' wants to call the police and get the 'nigger' out as soon as possible. And Ondine, too, rejects him: 'The man upstairs wasn't a Negro—meaning one of them. He is a stranger, a nasty and ignorant...nigger.' And Jadine is indignant at Margaret's question, 'you don't know him, do you?' She protests, 'know him? How would I know him?' She had not even seen a 'Black like him' for some years when she lived on Morgan Street in Baltimore before her mother died and she went to Philadelphia at age twelve to live with her Uncle Sydney and Aunt Ondine. She considers Son's hair symbolic of criminality: 'Wild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail.' Yet she finds in him that part of herself she has long denied.

When he first grabs her from behind and presses against her, she has to acknowledge her own culpability: 'He had jangled something in her that was so repulsive, so awful and he had managed to make her feel that the Ting that repelled her was not in him, but in her. That was why she was ashamed.' She had sworn at age twelve that she would 'never' let herself be victimized by a man mounting her like a dog in heat, yet she could not deny that Son was drawn to her by her own animal nature, 'which she couldn't help but which was her fault just the same.' In short, Son enters paradise like the biblical serpent, articulates forbidden desires, and galvanizes Jadine into action. In his insistence that she acknowledge the 'darker' side of herself, the authentic self obscured in the distorted mirror of her adopted Eden, Son forces Jadine to see the 'beast' in the glass.

Until now, conditioned by her sophisticated European education, Jadine is detached from her own blackness, much like Helene Wright or Ruth Dead or Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. Eight years earlier when she last saw Michael while on vacation with the Streets, he had accused her of abandoning her people. Though she knew his idealistic scheme of generating social reform by having black welfare mothers 'do crafts, pottery, clothing in their homes' was silly, she admitted that he 'did make me want to apologize for what I was doing, what I felt. For liking 'Ave Maria' better than gospel music.' Yet when they talk about Michael's hopeless plot, Jadine tells Valerian that 'Picasso is better than Itumba mask,' and she confesses

her embarrassment at attending 'ludicrous' art shows put on by pretentious blacks in Europe. Michael had encouraged her to return to Morgan Street with Sydney and Ondine to do handicraft. 'Can you believe it?' she asks Valerian. 'He might have convinced me if we'd had that talk on Morgan Street. But in Orange County on a hundred and twenty acres of green velvet?' She had long since moved in a white society where 'the black people she knew wanted what she wanted' and where success required her 'only to be stunning.... Say the obvious, ask stupid questions, laugh with abandon, look interested, and light up at any display of their humanity if they showed it.'

Nonetheless, Son's presence restores something of her black awareness, just as Guitar Bains awakens Milkman's black consciousness in *Song of Solomon*. He prompts her to recall the guilt she felt two months before when a beautiful African woman in a canary yellow dress spit on her in disgust in a Paris street. The embodiment of Jadine's own black heritage, the woman floated through glass like a vision out of her self, an alter ego manifesting judgment. As with the woman, Jadine felt something ambivalent toward Son even from the beginning. Her 'neck prickled' when she heard Margaret call him a gorilla, even though she herself 'had volunteered nigger.' And she experienced a 'curious embarrassment' picturing herself watching 'red-necked gendarmes zoom him away in a boat.' Somehow Son spoke from her dream consciousness, just as the African women invaded her psyche. The very morning Son was found in the house, Jadine had stared out her window trying to visualize the one hundred black horsemen who supposedly roamed the hills. She had to run away from Paris to decide whether or not to marry a wealthy white man, Son's opposite, and felt somehow 'inauthentic.' On the edge of a fall, Jadine, too, awaits the tempter who can penetrate her illusory garden room, which Son himself describes as 'fragile'—like a dollhouse for an adult doll.'

And Son too is ambiguous. Though he 'burrowed in his plate like an animal' and sat 'grunting in monosyllables,' sipping from his saucer and wiping up salad dressing with his bread, he is no wild boar. Even Ondine confesses that 'he's been here long enough and quiet enough to rape, kill and steal—do whatever he wanted and all he did was eat.' Enthralled by Jadine, he had stared at her through the night with an 'appetite for her so gargantuan it lost its focus and spread to his eyes, the orange of his shirt, the curtains, the moonlight'; but he never violated her, standing before her image like Beast trembling outside Beauty's door... When Valerian welcomes him into the civilized circle, he willfully adapts. He puts on a Hickey Freeman suit, apologizes to Jadine and Ondine, begins using 'ma'am,' 'Mr.,' and 'Sir,' and talks about his own 'mama' with Ondine. He even tells Valerian how to get rid of ants by using mirrors and revitalizes Valerian's cyclamens by flicking them with his fingers. Valerian accepts Son as surrogate to Michael, the legitimate 'son' having turned prodigal, the outlaw 'Son' having returned in the guise of a black 'other.' In so characterizing Son, Morrison makes him something more than 'the official heroic black male' some critics see when they read *Tar Baby* as a stereotypical black novel.

Criminal and hero, Son embodies the ambivalence of the serpent figure: forbidden but unconsciously willed, possessing healing powers but potentially destructive. He recalls growing up with Cheyenne, a demon-like lover who always waited for him outside Mrs. Tyler's house where he took piano lessons. Toward the end of the novel, he tells Jadine how at eighteen he went to Vietnam, he was busted, went back to Eloee, Florida, where he grew up, and married the promiscuous but nonetheless innocent Cheyenne. When he came home drunk after a fight and found her sleeping with a thirteen-year-old, he ran his car through the house and started a fire that killed her.... Son ran away not in simple fear but because, he recalls, 'I didn't want their punishment, I wanted my own.' Without roots, 'sought for but not after,' he had spent eight years among Huck Finns, Nigger Jims, Calibans; a Cain 'driven across the face of the earth,' he also possesses the moral consciousness of a romantic rebel, the ambiguity of the satanic figure in William Blake, or Melville.

No wonder Jadine is threatened by him. On one hand, like a black Jane Eyre, she wants to clean, tame, and control him; and when he begins to show his civilized nature, she finds it impossible to resist him. Yet it is his raw, powerful being that most challenges her. At one point he tells Jadine that 'there is something in you to be smelled which I have discovered myself. And no seal-skin coat or million-dollar earrings can disguise it.' Once when Jadine waits for him to return with gas for the jeep, she gets trapped accidentally in the swamp quicksand. Like Milkman caught in the Virginia woods in *Song of Solomon*, she is stripped of every vestige of civilization; and the 'swamp women' who supposedly mate with the legendary black

horsemen temporarily claim her. Suggestively, though, it is at the ill-fated Christmas dinner when Jadine and the other characters confront the devastating self-knowledge that drives them out of paradise.

Here, all the lies concocted to preserve innocence prove futile. For long years Margaret and Valerian Street had evaded the truth, Sydney and Ondine had settled into a passive acquiescence, Jadine had sacrificed her blackness to succeed in a white world. As they approach Christmas day their lives have been suddenly revived by Son's coming. New hope arises: Valerian and Margaret sleep together for the first time in many years. Jadine awakens from long self-repression, there is renewed hope that Michael really will come, and even Valerian's plants begin to thrive under Son's 'black magic.' Symbolically, like a Christ child, Son seemingly 'made something grow that was dying.' Yet when Valerian fires the black servants, Gideon and Therese, because they were supposedly stealing apples, paradise falls. Son's illusion that Valerian is a worthy white man collapses, and he sees in the rich man's harsh gesture the suppression he had found in other white oppressors. Valerian could now see in Son's eyes 'one hundred black men on one hundred unshod horses.' The precarious balance of deceit that had sustained the garden can no longer endure: the truth gives witness to a fallen world.

All stand exposed. The community of whites and blacks, owners and servants, is torn asunder when Son, the outcast, threatens the order. His rebellion against Gideon and Therese's dismissal reveals the lies each character has grasped to guard against self-knowledge. His anger releases Ondine's long held secret. In her violent outcry she confesses that Margaret had abused Michael as a child. As a nineteen year old mother, Margaret, once 'the Principle [*sic*] Beauty of Maine,' had struck pins into Michael and burned him with cigarettes. She had grown up satisfied...until, at fourteen, she became conscious of her beauty and so lost her innocence. Married by the insistent Valerian when she was only seventeen, Margaret moved into his wealthy home where she felt the intimidating presence of Valerian's ex-wife and 'stiffened like Joan Fontaine in *Rebecca*.' Driven to perversion by a profound loneliness, she had tortured her son. Still wanting desperately to believe that Michael loved her and would return for her sake at Christmas, she had tried to recreate the trailer she grew up in in her bedroom at L'Arbe de la Croix until the 'nigger in the woodpile,' the serpent haunting her unconscious, invaded her reconstructed paradise.

But the guilt is a composite guilt in which Valerian also shares. He, too, yearns to go to Michael, 'find him, touch him, rub him, hold him in his arms,' but he himself had caused Margaret's loneliness, had driven her to see her child as a threat to her in 'its prodigious appetite for security,' in its 'criminal arrogance.' Responding to her profound guilt, Margaret seeks punishment from Valerian, asking him to hit her, but he always responds 'tomorrow, perhaps, tomorrow' for he is too incapacitated by his own guilt to act. While she seeks absolution by washing her red hair again and again and drying it in the sun 'against every instruction ever given her about the care of her hair.' Valerian isolates himself in his greenhouse caring for nothing. He, too, knows his culpability, 'because he had lived with a woman who had made something kneel down in him the first time he saw her, but about whom he knew nothing,' because he 'had watched his son grow and talk but also about him he had known nothing.' And there was 'something in the crime of innocence so revolting it paralyzed him. He had not known because he had not taken the trouble to know.' Though Morrison gives Valerian a measure of sympathy as he recalls the time he lost his own childhood the day a black, toothless washerwoman told him his father was dead, she speaks decidedly of his guilt...

Even Ondine and Sydney share in the crime. Ondine had not stopped Margaret from torturing Michael even though she knew of her cruelty. When Ondine protests that she did not stop Margaret because it was not her job, Margaret responds 'no, it's not your job, Ondine. But I wish it had been your duty, I wish you had liked me enough to help me.' And even in his dreams, Sydney knew he lived in a false Eden with Valerian Street. He prided himself on being 'one of those Philadelphia Negroes,' but each night he dreamed his 'tiny dream' of the lost Eden in Baltimore he gave up for security and position. No one, neither black nor white, can claim innocence.

After the fall, Valerian and Margaret seem to be beyond recovery, and Sydney and Ondine remain uncertain about their end. Only Son and Jadine act. They leave the irreparable garden to go to New York, where Jadine intends to assimilate Son into her world of security. The contraries cannot coexist, though, and neither character proves capable of integrating the opposite. Gideon had warned Son about Jadine:

'Your first yalla?... Look out. It's hard for them not to be white people. Hard, I'm telling you. Most never make it.' Jadine's acceptance of white values is reflected in her urban environment. She is pure city: Baltimore, Philadelphia, Paris, New York. And Son is all rural Florida, 'Eloe.' He stands outside the white system, a riotous Cain; she sells herself to the monied urban culture. Yet fleeing the debunked Edenic island, they try vainly to stay together. In contrast to Jadine's easy indifference, Son cannot help empathizing with the outcast blacks he finds in the city.

Once, while working a demanding job loading boxes, he brought home a wild, tempestuous black woman who reminded him of his sister. The direct contrast to Jadine, she was cursing a man in the middle of traffic...a ring glittering in her nose. Embracing this seemingly unlovable primal being, Son took her to dinner with Jadine and then back to their apartment, where she stole his change and left during the night. Jadine's world, Son cannot be of it. For her part, Jadine temporarily finds something restorative in Son's impulsiveness and powerful black pride. 'He unorphaned her completely. Gave her a brand-new childhood.' But clearly Son cannot live comfortably in Jadine's self-constructed paradise. When Son takes her to his lost garden in Eloe, it is apparent that she cannot live in his world either with its apparent poverty and ignorance and isolation. Eloe embodies all the 'blackness' she had long struggled to escape.

Eloe represents the opposite to Son: self-worth, wholeness, and values. Long separated from his father because he fled after his wife's death, Son carried with him the guilt of a prodigal son. Though he had written money orders to his father, he felt ashamed that he had never written a note. His father had not cashed the money orders, in part because Son wrote his name on them, and he treasured Son's handwriting, 'pretty, like your mama.' A returned prodigal suffering remorse, Son honored his father's moral judgment that Jadine should not stay in his house if she and Son were not married. Made morally sensitive, Son insists to Jadine that she stay at his Aunt Rosa's modest house.

Jadine, too, becomes morally alive. She experiences profound self-awareness when Aunt Rosa accidentally sees her naked in bed: 'No man made her feel that naked, that unclothed. Leererers, lovers, doctors, artists—none of them had made her feel exposed. More than exposed. Obscene.' And here too she dreams of judgment. She sees all the black women in her life in the dark out the door: 'The night women were not merely against her...not merely looking superior over their sagging breasts and folding stomachs, they seemed somehow in agreement about her, and they were all out to get her, tie her, bind her. Grab the person she had worked hard to become and choke it off with their soft loose tits.'

Even when he first saw her sleeping at Valerian's estate, Son yearned 'to press his dreams' into Jadine's consciousness, to will her out of the white man's house and into a world of 'fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie tables in the basement of the church and white wet sheets flapping on the line.' But though he devastated Valerian's white paradise, he could not reclaim her. His failure becomes apparent when Jadine tells him that while he was playing criminal driving his car into his wife's bed, hiding from the law, she was being educated with the help of a 'poor old white dude.' 'Stop loving your ignorance,' she tells him; 'it isn't lovable.' Yet he also denies *her* pride. What they taught you in college 'didn't include me,' he tells her, and so they kept your ignorant, 'because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself.'

Coming to a frightening awareness, naked after the fall, Jadine eludes the truth, flees back to the elite society where she will never recover from her loss of innocence. Incapable of a saving sin against her security, she will never integrate her other self.... Jadine is caught between her sex and her race. To be true to her freedom as a woman, she must resist Son's male insistence that she play the subservient role of 'fat black ladies' serving pies in the church basement. To be true to her black heritage, though, she needs to sacrifice success in a white culture.... Jadine's 'fall' leads to no recovery. Cast East of Eden, she exists in unresolved duality...

And Son, too, cannot survive. When he returns to the island looking frantically for Jadine, the wise Therese, descendant of the blind horsemen, asks, 'if you cannot find her what will you do? Live in the garden of some other white people house?' She tells him to forget Jadine because 'she has forgotten her ancient properties.' And finally she offers him the only escape, joining the legendary horsemen in the hills: 'They are waiting in the hills for you....' Elizabeth House argues that Son is 'the rabbit' that successfully

escapes to the briars, 'that Jadine, the tar baby, will not successfully lure Son again.' Perhaps so, but Morrison allows Son no victory separate from the timeless world of legend and darkness. Becoming an eternal night rider returning to the dark unconscious from which he emerged, Son retreats from a world where he can find no reconciliation, no solution to his fallen humanity.

Jadine and Son, Valerian and Margaret, Sydney and Ondine, all bear the consequences of self-knowledge. All move East of Eden. The Fall motif of *Tar Baby* does not explain away the novel's possible flaws, the sometimes obscure passages, or the rather awkward shift in tone and focus when Jadine and Son leave the island. But it makes Morrison's work considerably more substantial and meaningful than some critics have contended. To be sure, Morrison partly follows in the tradition of distinctly American literature with the depiction of the essential conflict between primitivity and civilization, rural and urban, redskin and pale face. But like her other novels, *Tar Baby* describes the passage from innocence to experience with biblical and theological elements: garden images, references to the 'snake,' expression of guilt and lost innocence, a yearning for the garden.

In all this she incorporates the black search for identity. Without significantly reducing the social commentary, the Fall theme raises the novel to a more universal level; without stereotyping characters as allegorical types, it gives them a symbolic dimension; without imposing structure, it provides an integrating pattern; and without sacrificing the novel's integrity, it allows for artistic ambiguity. Their duality exposed, the characters all seek equilibrium and struggle to exist in creative tension with their own dark sides. Cast from Edenic existence by virtue of the self-awareness, they all live after the Fall. Yet Morrison makes clear in all her novels that the authentic life can only be lived after a fall, that the ultimate crime is innocence itself; the 'tar baby' that ensnares her characters is their own self-ignorance. In her fictional realm 'good' and 'evil' constantly shift, and all her characters are convicted of their humanity. In just such a world, a fall from innocence is ironically essential to being, however frightening the risks, however ironic the end."

Terry Otten

"The Crime of Innocence in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*"
Studies in American Fiction 14
(Autumn 1986) 153-64

"*Tar Baby*, a modern version of the many-versioned folk tale, was published in 1981, and Toni Morrison was featured on the cover of *Newsweek*. Never before had this happened to a black American woman writer, and, as the author herself smilingly quipped, to a 'gray-haired middle-aged' one at that. Unlike her previous books, this one is set in the French West Indies, outside of the predominantly black community and outside of the borders and protections of life in the United States. It was also her first book with white people as central actors. A month after its release, *Tar Baby* was on the *New York Times* best-seller list, where it remained for four months. Her appearances to promote the book included a European tour. Toni Morrison, black woman writer, had put Lorain, Ohio, on the literary map, raised the currency of black women writers in American literature, and was an American writer of international fame."

Nellie Y. McKay, ed.

Critical Essays on Toni Morrison
(G. K. Hall 1988) 4-5

"*Tar Baby* looks at the social stratification among blacks and poses the young, European-educated American black woman Jadine as a rising star. The epitome of social success and beauty in a white-defined cosmos, she feels troubled, as if something is missing in her identity and values because she does not fit into the black society she considers home. She tries to recapture a familiar identity through a relationship with a chance acquaintance she met while in the Caribbean. The man, Son, is the archetypal outsider whose identity changes continuously as he moves from place to place. Submitting to the hardships of the black male-dominated life of a rural village does not suit Jadine; she has grown beyond similar black female identities. Jadine represents the problems accompanying black women who are educated and thus alienate themselves from their root culture, problems Morrison herself experienced as a rising professional who was attractive, black, female, and urban. There is a parallel between fiction and author: Morrison created Jadine

after the enormous success of *Song of Solomon* and after she had become a visiting lecturer at Yale University in 1976.”

Timothy J. Cox
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1072

“Sula’s virtual defeat is replaced in *Tar Baby* by Jadine’s spectacular success, yet Nel’s accusatory voice comes through clearly in the new novel, making Jadine’s independence appear highly problematic and suspect.... Margaret’s betrayal of maternal trust resonates with a network of minor, semi-amusing perversions of nurturance, all of which connect food with family and can be traced ultimately to the ideal of nursing mother with ‘magic breasts (as well as to the presumption that women have exclusive responsibility for infant care).... The transmission of her story to Valerian is analogous to maternal feeding...The emblem for his refusal of knowledge and of involvement is the greenhouse, the self-enclosed, sealed-off world into which Valerian withdraws after his retirement to engage in the pseudo-nurturance of plants....

Jadine, rather than Son, lays the stronger claim to the status of orphan, to remaining unattached. In this respect, the relationship is a partial reworking of that in *Sula* between Sula and Ajax.... *Tar Baby* implicitly raises the question of whether or not this assertion of power by a woman can be seen as a legitimate positive development. The reply is at least as much negative as affirmative. This surprising outcome is the result of an authorial intervention which rights the imbalance between Jadine and Son in his favor and at her expense.... Jadine’s opposition of high art to black culture seems forced and unnecessarily uncharitable The images of fruitfulness and birth associated with Son are designed to win our approval, while the corresponding negative images for Jadine neatly undercut out sympathy for her....

Son’s loyalty to Therese has been manifested earlier. He is the only one at the island house concerned to know her real name; her dismissal for attempting to steal apples at Christmas arouses him to open rebellion against Valerian. When Son obeys Therese, he is reborn in her image of him as the term ‘nursing’ and the metaphor of a baby’s learning to walk suggest.... This adventure transcends the previous critical image of ‘Mama-spoiled black man,’ transforms Son into a legendary male... The argument Therese uses to convince Son that he should give up the search for Jadine echoes Morrison’s dedication page. ‘Forget her. There is nothing in her parts for you. She has forgotten her ancient properties’... At any rate, Morrison’s authorial presence stands behind Therese’s defense of ancient maternal properties, the loss of which convicts Jadine. By contrast, Morrison appears to endorse the romantic mythology of black male flight...

Morrison’s depiction of gender in *Tar Baby* is triumphantly heterosexual.... But this outright opposition to homosexuality and bisexuality extends to a tacit exclusion of ‘androgyny’ in favor of a strong sense of male/female differentiation. Any reevaluation and mixing of traditional gender categories threatens the sexual confusion that fascinates Therese... At the end of *Tar Baby* Son becomes an Ajax. Insofar as Son has been involved in nurturance, his involvement has been strictly limited by his belief in the gender divisions of his hometown. He does not achieve a nurturant identity of his own, but rather fuses with the nurturance proffered by a maternal figure. Yet the development of nurturant capacity in a male character, independent of a mothering female who routinely provides it for him, is one precondition for a way out of the impasse in which the novel leaves Jadine.”

Peter B. Erickson
“Images of Nurturance in *Tar Baby*”
Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present
eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah
(Amistad 1993) 293-96, 301, 303-06

“In contrast to the liberational aspect of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison’s most recent novel, *Tar Baby*, registers a deep sense of pessimism. Here, cultural exiles—both white and black—come together on a Caribbean island where they live out their lives in a neatly compartmentalized bourgeois fashion: the candy magnate Valerian Street in his stereophonic-equipped greenhouse; his wife, cloistered in her bedroom; and the servants, Ondine and Sydney, ensconced in their comfortable quarters. Daily life precludes ‘eruptions

of funk,' a lesson poignantly taught when Margaret Lenore discovers the bedraggled wild man, Son, in her closet. Although Son's appearance suggests Rastafarianism and outlawry, any shock value stirred by his discovery is canceled when he, too, proves to be just another exile.... Sydney...every night dreams of his boyhood in Baltimore.... For the black man hanging to the coattails of the white upper bourgeoisie, who thinks of himself as a 'Philadelphia Negro,' the back streets of Baltimore are a social debt. His desire for assimilation to white bourgeois culture and the many years spent in service to the bourgeois class negate his ever experiencing the deep sensual and emotional pleasure that Pilate has whenever she beholds a blue sky or bites into a vine-ripened tomato....

Son's dream of 'yellow houses with white doors' and 'fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the church' is an image of wish fulfillment, rooted in private nostalgia. It bears no resemblance to his real past as we later come to understand it out of what the novel shows us of Eloë, Florida, where tough black women with little time for pie tables have built their own rough-hewn, unpainted homes. For the 'tar baby,' Jadine, fashioned out of the rich white man's indulgence and the notions of culture most appealing to bourgeois America (European education and Paris 'haute couture'), the past is irretrievable and no longer perceived as desirable. As the individual whose cultural exile is the most profound, Jadine is haunted by waking visions, born out of guilt and fear. In her most terrifying vision, a mob of black women—some familiar, some only known by their names—crowds into her room. Revealing, then waving, their breasts at her, they condemn Jadine for having abandoned the traditional maternal role of black women.... Jadine rejects family—her Aunt Ondine, for her homey ways and maternal nature—and culture—the black islanders, so remote from Jadine's trajectory into the future that she never bothers to learn their names."

Susan Willis

"Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison"
Critical Perspectives (1993) 313-14

"On one hand, Morrison wants to affirm the self-reliance and freedom of a black woman who makes choices for her own life on her own terms. On the other hand, she also seeks, according to her statements from an interview published in *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*, to 'point out the dangers...that can happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no historical connection'.... For Morrison, the women in the trees symbolize the women she seeks to affirm—the mothers, grandmothers and sisters to whom she dedicates the novel. For Jadine, the women in the trees represent all the women who make her feel 'inauthentic'.... Thus, *Tar Baby* can be interpreted as a modern cautionary tale in which Morrison draws on the Afro-American oral narrative tradition to expose the pitfalls of white middle-class aspirations for the black woman and to illustrate the consequences of her social and cultural 'misbehavior'....

Tar Baby is essentially the narrative of Jadine's flight from crisis.... While [Son] values the nurturing aspects of home and fraternity, she is rootless and places greater value on what she can own. Yet as the tar baby that Valerian creates, Jadine initially lures Son to her.... The women in Eloë represent her familial past, while the women in the trees, cited earlier, represent historical tradition in that they are the women who mate with the runaway slaves according to Caribbean folk narratives. All these women symbolize Jadine's refusal to define herself in terms of familial past, historical tradition, and cultural heritage.... The fact that these images haunt her suggests that psychic wholeness will continue to elude her until she bridges the cultural gulf between what they represent and who she is.... Jadine [is] the tar baby that entraps Son, and...the woman who cannot sustain a relationship because she lacks the ancestral power of being able to 'hold things together'.... The novel goes full circle in that once again a crisis causes Jadine to flee. Unable to resolve it any other way, she returns to Paris....

[Valerian] has no respect for Michael's socialist political leanings, his anthropological pursuits or his insistent desire 'for value in life not money.' In light of his apparent estrangement from both parents, Michael is an orphan in the spiritual sense of the word.... He...admonishes [Jadine] for 'abandoning' her 'history' and her 'people.' (He apparently overlooks how his anthropological excursions into minority cultures represent his own attempt to abandon or disguise his membership in the group that has exploited them.)...."

Marilyn Sanders Mobley

"Narrative Dilemma: Jadine as Cultural Orphan in *Tar Baby*"

“*Song of Solomon* is Morrison’s most positive depiction of the values of community as a crucial balance between individual liberation and reciprocal obligation, as well as her most artistically accomplished narrative. In *Tar Baby*, the theme of cultural displacement assumes another, somewhat less aesthetically satisfying, expression.... The mysterious Son emerges as if a demon from the white unconscious: the anonymous black rapist who creeps menacingly out of the darkness, the proverbial ‘nigger in the woodpile.’ Other stereotypes originating in white culture produce equally false and damaging images.... Jadine Childs is anomalously ‘split’ between two pairs of figurative parents, one white and the other black. A quasi-member of both the Street and the Childs families, she moves comfortably between black and white worlds and between America and Europe; she is more respectful of and socially at ease with the Streets, her financial benefactors, than with the aunt and uncle who reared and loved her.... Jadine’s ‘failure’ as a daughter stems in part from anger she still feels toward her dead mother....

Through Jadine’s brief but intense relationship with Son—a man from an economic and social strata that Jadine initially regards as beneath her—Morrison explores the implications of such psychological and cultural boundary-straddling.... Son is characterized as...a...‘natural man... He becomes Jadine’s tutor, presiding over her temporary immersion in the black culture from which she is estranged. Like the ‘good colored girls’ of *The Bluest Eye*, who mask their funkiness in order to edge up into the white world’s greater opportunities, Jadine initially wants nothing to do with a man who reminds her of what she is grateful to have left behind....

On a picnic they take together, Jade, wearing her ‘Easter white cotton [dress]—all temptation and dare,’ falls into a pit of tar pitch. In this almost too obviously symbolic scene, Jade’s ‘whiteness’ is literally immersed in blackness. Predictably, afterwards Jade falls in love with Son.... Son’s peers regard Jade as his prize woman, as if ‘she was a Cadillac he had won, or stolen, or even bought for all they knew.’ Though this view offends Jade, it is no different an image that the one she consciously cultivates in her life as a model.... The lovers’ ecstatic but doomed connection symbolizes a kind of radical division between the educated and the uneducated; between power and powerlessness; and between urbanity, material well-being, rationality, and privilege on the one hand and emotional intensity, provincial values, and spiritual well-being on the other.... In the rather too programmatic clash of wills and beliefs, Morrison examines the gap between outsiders and insiders, education and cultural rootedness, and competing definitions of authenticity within black experience....

One day at a grocery store in Paris, Jadine had seen a tall ‘tar-black’ woman with scarified cheeks, wearing a long canary-yellow dress. (In Morrison’s novels, the most seductive, sexually free women, like Nel Wright’s whore-grandmother, Rochelle, and Sula Peace’s mother, Hannah, wear yellow dresses)... The woman had, inscrutably, spat upon the pavement.... One of Jade’s first reactions to Son—in response to a sexual insult—is to spit at him, in unconscious imitation of the mysterious tar-black woman in yellow.... Morrison has explained the figure of the woman in yellow as ‘the original self—the self that we betray when we lie, the one that is always there.... [O]ne measures one’s other self against it’....

Son cites the [Tar Baby] story to illustrate his contention that women like Jadine are tar babies—ensnarers of black men. Convinced of the necessity for preserving the traditional culture, he regards the tar baby as the white world’s corrupting lure for upwardly mobile black people. Once they are caught by the lure of affluence, they become psychologically and materially enslaved. For Jade, spoiled by the worldly pleasures that beauty, education, privilege and money can buy, the tar baby is the ‘coven’ of women who would ensnare her in domestic, sexual, and procreative functions—much as, earlier in the narrative, she is mired in the swampy tar pit. To a certain extent, the conflict symbolized in the image of the tar baby transcends its ethnic sources. The tar baby is that which would ensnare and overwhelm one, threaten one’s ego boundaries and one’s efforts at separation from the forces, whether external or internal, that might engulf the self. It is that shadowy aspect of the Other that must be confronted as a prelude to authenticity and autonomy.

The symbolism of the tar baby is not clarified by the novel’s end. Morrison has remarked elsewhere that ‘the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together.’ Yet the novel does not

entirely fulfill this sense and thus fails to resolve the set of tensions the author has dramatized. One questions whether Jade's encounter with Son so changes her that she relinquishes her narcissistic self-worship to become a hard-working 'queen ant' struggling for the survival of her people. Instead her flight from Son and both sets of her 'parents' seems an ironic inversion of Milkman Dead's flight into authenticity and a return to her self-indulgent life.... Son returns to Dominique, hoping to regain Jadine, even at the expense of Eloë and what it signifies. But his willing sacrifice never takes place; Jadine has already departed, and another kind of sacrifice is intended for him. He enters the darkness from which he emerged at the beginning, to be symbolically absorbed into the legend of them mythical horsemen descended from African slaves: elemental, inhuman powers of the universe. Like the Son of God, whose image is suggested in his generic name and in his appearance at the pointedly named L'Arbe de la Croix, he eventually becomes the scapegoat for the internal contradictions of a cultural group....

In *Tar Baby*, the incest wish is implied in the relationship between Margaret Street and her son.... Margaret is caught in a loveless marriage and seeks in her son the intimacy she is unable to find with her husband. She unconsciously desires as a lover the son she had abused during his infancy, while priding herself on what she believes is an unpossessive maternal attitude.... The incestuous quality of her affection is further implied by her desire to live near, or even with, her son rather than her husband.... As a baby, Michael had imposed his devouring infant needs upon a mother incapable of meeting her own needs for affection.”

Roberta Rubenstein

“Pariahs and Community”

Critical Perspectives (1993) 127, 132-33, 139-40, 145, 152-54

“Students condemn Jadine for being a modern woman who has lost touch with her heritage. They criticize her for allowing her aunt and uncle to wait on her, for preferring Margaret's company to her family's, for allowing Valerian to finance her education. They criticize her preference in men, food, education, and vocation. Students argue that she, like Milkman, is fully assimilated into mainstream American culture and that this novel, like its predecessor, teaches the importance of knowing the past.... [Eleanor] Traylor identifies [Jadine] as 'the carcinogenic disease eating away at the ancestral spirit of the race'...“the disease of disconnection”...

While students are adept at identifying Jadine as a product of assimilation, they need help recognizing Son as her antithesis, a representative of black nationalism. Students need to recognize him as a trickster, a character rooted in African American folklore—both as an embodiment of mythic past and as a gifted storyteller. They need to recognize his preference for Eloë, his refusal to fill out college applications or look for work, and his celebration of fraternity as part of a nationalist agenda....

Students who saw Son as the embodiment of an ideal confront his flaws: his hypocritical and negligent treatment of Alma, the limitations of his fraternal feelings that encompass only men, his refusal to compromise his beliefs to survive. We discuss the futility of his joining the chevaliers. Students realize that Morrison is looking skeptically at the nationalist politics that is a theme of her earlier novels. At the same time, they acknowledge the value of Jadine's politics. The first black model on the cover of *Elle* is changing the world. Most important, they realize that Morrison does not ask the audience to choose between assimilationism and nationalism. She illuminates the strengths and weaknesses of each and recommends neither. Deborah McDowell notes that 'Morrison confuses binary oppositions' and that her fiction demands a 'shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions.' This quotation is an appropriate description of politics in *Tar Baby*....

Students who believe Morrison was influenced by [Joel Chandler] Harris's version usually identify Son as the rabbit and Jadine as the tar baby. They imagine Son's continued search for Jadine as evidence of his ensnarement. Students who prefer this ending read Son's departing 'lickety-split' as indicative of a successful escape. Equally thought-provoking but less frequent are the essays that cast Jadine as the rabbit and Son as the tar baby. While he finds freedom by joining the chevaliers, she finds freedom on a transcontinental flight that returns her to her briar patch in Paris.... [Some students] argue that Son and Jadine are each other's tar babies and that both escape or fail to escape.... If they believe Son has joined the chevaliers, they believe in the vitality of his cultural inheritance. If they believe he continues his search,

they relinquish belief in the stories of the past when the novel ends.... Morrison takes this idea as far as she can by including both versions of the tale as well as an inconclusive ending.”

Madelyn Jablon

“*Tar Baby: Philosophizing Blackness*”

Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni Morrison

eds. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle

(MLA 1997) 73-76

“Situating her tale on an island in the Caribbean—Isle des Chevaliers—enables Morrison to foreground and exaggerate the very conflicts that determine the cultural malaise in the United States. Her narrative strategy is analogous to taking a substance out of its familiar habitat and studying it under a microscope.... Students should consider Jadine and Son’s ‘reading’ of each other. For example, they first view each other from perspectives born out of cultural stereotypes each has accepted without question.... Jadine and Son each attempt to ‘rescue’ the other on the basis of their assumptions.... *Tar Baby* is a disconcerting book to many students.”

Marilyn Sanders Mobley

“Telling Stories: A Cultural Studies Approach to *Tar Baby*”

Approaches (1997) 144, 146

“*Tar Baby*, Toni Morrison’s fourth novel, is perhaps the most problematic and probably the least written about and acclaimed of her works. Reviewers and scholars have registered their general uncertainty about the text not only through their widely divergent interpretations and judgments of its artistic merit but also through their relative silence.... The end of the text has frustrated reviewers and other readers and may frustrate students as well because it offers what seem to be two conclusions. One appears to be for the character Son, the other for Jadine. Unfortunately, they seem to be two irreconcilable resolutions to the conflict involved in constructing the self in relation to issues of race, class, and gender....

The American homeland is reduced to two discrete islands of culture, Eloë and New York City. Son’s home, Eloë, is an isolated haven of black folk culture that nurtures him but threatens Jadine for various reasons, not least of all because the power of women is curtailed there. Jadine, by contrast, is far more at home in New York City, ‘a black woman’s town.’ Son finds it populated disconcertingly with ‘a whole new race of people.... Valerian established himself as the mythically grand Candy King and has retired to his island retreat.... L’Arbe de la Croix, the home of the expatriate Street family, evokes the colonial past of America (and France) in the Caribbean.

With its explicit stratification of white owners, house servants, and poor workers, the house on the hill is like a plantation. The setting draws attention to the source of the Streets’ American wealth in the colonial past. The family made its fortune in the candy business, an industry founded on the exploited land and labor of the Caribbean sugarcane fields. Thus Morrison’s depiction of the island ultimately proves a microscopic portrait of America, with the full spectrum of American history and social problems carefully filtered so that the primary elements of race, class, and gender stand out in sharp relief.... Morrison’s attention to white culture in *Tar Baby* thus may make racial oppression seem mythic or eternal and may estrange readers. But the major difficulty for some students may be that in *Tar Baby* Morrison writes about race relations that are further complicated by significant—not peripheral—issues of class and gender....

The traditional tar-baby tale has a lengthy history, and scholars have researched its African and Indian origins as well as its many American versions. The tale may be best known through the work of the white writer Joel Chandler Harris. In 1880 Harris popularized the tale in two stories, ‘The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story’ and ‘How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox’ (*Uncle Remus*). The tale gained further prominence in popular American culture from Walt Disney’s motion picture *Song of the South* (1946). The many permutations of the story are interesting...because Morrison seems to allude to several of them. Harris’s version, which is among the most widely recognized, is an obvious source for Morrison. Harris imposes a frame on the traditional tale: Uncle Remus, an elderly former slave, tells his folktales to a young white boy....

During the antebellum period slaves told a form of the tale, perhaps inherited from African trickster lore, to educate young slaves to use their intelligence to overcome their masters' power and to conceal their anger behind a mask of humility.... After the Civil War the tar-baby tale served for African Americans as an allegory of their history, of the passage from freedom to entrapment and back to freedom.... Through the figure of the polite young boy, Harris taught his Northern audience that white Southerners unhappy with Reconstruction could read this version as representing the struggle of the 'unreconstructed south' against the 'predatory north.' The white Southerner is the rabbit, caught in the tar baby of the 'Negro Question.' He 'distract[s] the Northern fox by asking only to be left alone in his briar patch (local political matters), and finally find[s] himself free by the eventual partial disenfranchisement of the Negro'....

In the cultural conflict of traditional African American and dominant white American culture, it can be read as an allegory of the struggle of those caught between these cultures. The rabbit can be seen as an African American seeking a sense of belonging in either culture; the tar baby created by a fox or a farmer figure may represent temptations of the dominant culture, particularly American materialism. The briar patch may signify traditional African American culture and values or the African aspect of Du Bois's double consciousness. However, that reading of the tale need not be the only one. Brer Rabbit can be seen as encountering any figure or representation that threatens to entrap him. His escape may be toward a firm sense of identity that seems independent of the representations offered by the dominant culture. In the briar patch he appears to find a haven from imposed myth.

Considering the background of the tar-baby tale, Jadine and Son are the two characters in *Tar Baby* who are most clearly caught, like Brer Rabbit, between two cultures. Son overtly positions himself as Brer Rabbit by accusing Jadine of being a tar baby. Once he describes her as a 'tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap'; he later accuses her of being a decoy created by Valerian. Son constructs or envisions Jadine as a feminine tar baby who has accepted the values of white society and who now threatens to ensnare him by luring him into complicity with that society's values and away from his 'authentic' home, the traditional black culture in which he was born and bred....

Jadine can also be seen as Brer Rabbit.... Marilyn E. Mobley states that Jadine's tar baby is the materialism of the dominant white culture, which tempts her away from the 'cultural constructions of race and mothering that are part of her African-American heritage.' According to Peter B. Erickson, however, the vision of the African woman in yellow with her 'tar-black fingers' is Jadine's tar baby, an image of maternity, sexuality, and traditional femininity from which she desires to break free. Son could also be seen as Jadine's tar baby. A man of traditional values with a conservative vision of women, he tries to tempt her back into a limited, traditional female role. While Son watches Jadine sleep, he attempts to 'manipulate her dreams, to insert his own dreams into her'; these dreams are of 'fat black ladies in white dresses minding the pie table in the basement of the church.'

By inscribing these characters into the tar-baby tale, Morrison explores some of the cultural choices available to young African American women and men. At the end of the novel Jadine flees into the briar patch of Paris. She seeks to define herself free of the expectations concerning gender, race, and class that she feels overwhelming her on the Isle des Chevaliers and in Eloë. When Son, by contrast, flees into the hills of the island at the close of the novel, he is apparently running toward the mythical horsemen and toward further absorption into a traditional folk culture. He runs from the dominant white culture, from Jadine's rejection of his cultural history, and toward a view of racial identity that emphasizes the power of inherited 'ancient properties' and connection with the natural world.

It has been difficult for many critics to decide on the character for which Morrison feels more sympathy. The ambiguity of Morrison's stance may trouble students. Finally, it seems, neither Son nor Jadine triumphs unequivocally, and neither discovers a cultural choice that is appropriate for them both. In fleeing from family, country, and her African-American community, Jadine seems possibly to be denying any value to black culture or traditional femininity. Her life, according to Trudier Harris, 'is not about having forgotten her ancient properties; it is a refusal to recognize the existence or value of such properties.' Son's escape, like Jadine's, is based on a problematic denial of history. His reclamation of 'ancient' values suggests his belief in 'the possibility of returning to a prewhite black purity.'

The multiple and irreconcilable resolutions to *Tar Baby* have frustrated those seeking a fulfilled 'quest for wholeness' in the novel. But in leaving unsolved the problem of how best to define the self in relation to race, class, and gender, Morrison provides 'places and spaces so that the reader can participate.' She supplies material for widely divergent analyses of her mythic fiction, thus allowing readers themselves to act as Brer Rabbits while her text serves as a kind of tar baby."

Ann Jurecic and Arnold Rampersad
"Teaching *Tar Baby*"
Approaches (1997) 147-53

"Since the erasure of cultural self-consciousness expresses itself in a range of self-destructive attitudes, Morrison rightly views these factors as central to understanding and, perhaps, resolving the particular tensions that exist between Black women and Black men. Coming after the transformation in Milkman's treatment of women—his relationship with Sweet, for example—which the recovery of his past inspires and facilitates, one might see *Tar Baby* (1981), with its compilation of antagonistic relationships, as the continuing elaboration of a cultural trauma which the earlier novel uncovers. In a 1982 interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison observed... 'I think that the conflict of genders is a cultural illness'....

Significantly, the 'contentions' between Black women and Black men—alluded to in the novel's epigraph—fall largely outside the parameters of gender(ed) relationships or heterosexual romance, and within the domain of class antagonisms.... Unlike *Song of Solomon*, which depicts Milkman's emergence and recuperation from 'cultural illness' through his journey of immersion into the U.S. South, *Tar Baby* is set on an island... The most striking aspect of the relationship between Jadine and Son is...that each, viewing the other's world as impoverished and/or unsafe, sees it as an occasion to 'rescue' the other.... While neither will admit the validity of the other's perspective, for the reader with historically and culturally informed double-vision, both observations are clearly accurate....

Son's attempt to 'rescue' Jadine from that 'blinding awe' of all things European does not begin with the escape to New York. Rather, it begins during the nights he spent undetected in the house, in Jadine's bedroom.... Son is that 'tree that wished to dance with' Jadine, as his magical movement in the narrative indicates.... How Jadine responds to the tree whose waist she grabs, illuminates many aspects of the relationship between the two lovers and the influence of the cultural illness...Jadine holds on to the tree in desperation.... The insistent repetition of the tree wanting to dance with Jadine is Morrison's way of inscribing this love affair in a Black cultural context....

While the names of the central characters—Son and the Childses—evoke memories of the racist designation of Black men as 'boys' and the paternalistic view of all Black people as childlike, Morrison's naming intensifies the contestation and prompts an urgent and introspective interrogation of the characters' maturity.... The description of Jadine standing 'up to [her] kneecaps in rot' in *Sein de Veilles* is perhaps an oblique reference to the economic stagnation of Black communities like Eloe and, on a broader scale, to the declining economic condition of the African American community as a whole [Detroit?]. The briar patch 'home' that Son remembers as 'very dry, green and quiet' has become a swamp. *Sein de Veilles* is the swamp created by the 'killers of the world,' a by-product of their program for maximizing their own wealth by 'civilizing' the planet....

When she goes to Eloe, Rosa, in repeatedly referring to her as 'daughter,' explicitly attempts to un orphan, reclaim, and revise Jadine's identity as a member of the cultural community.... Back in New York, however, Jadine fiercely rejects this attempt to restore a self-conscious African female identity.... Beyond the frequent references to her impaired vision, signaled by her shortcomings as visual artist/photographer, Jadine's distorted view of the world, and the fractured consciousness from which it derives, is fully displayed in her acceptance of reality as consisting of binary oppositions.... Indeed, the novel convincingly discredits Jadine's agenda for 'rescue,' not because financial security is to be disdained, nor because it is maliciously intentioned, but because it is undergirded by a materialist and self-alienating consciousness which recommends selling one's cultural inheritance and 'birthright for a mess of pottage,' as the narrator of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* phrases it.... Jadine may yet *re-collect* her 'true and ancient properties'...."

Judylyn S. Ryan

“Contested Visions/Double-Vision in *Tar Baby*”
Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches
ed. Nancy J. Peterson
(Johns Hopkins 1997) 64-65, 67, 72, 74-76, 81-85

“*Tar Baby*, Morrison’s sustained mythic text, begins with a water lady, a goddess reminiscent of the African water goddesses, nudging Son to an island where reclamation is the only surety. On Isles des Chevaliers, the mythology of ancestral blind horsemen dominates the present, and everyone there is waiting for the past to renew itself through them. For Morrison, myth becomes a metaphorical abandonment of time because its function is to reconnect the poetry that the development in languages has shifted away from the word. The sense of a metaphor is represented as origin in myth—the two are not separable, and therefore to be metaphorical is to abandon the dissonance of time. Within such a cosmology, the potential of *Beloved* is freed from the dominance of a history that would submerge this story. This liberation is perhaps the most critical issue of Morrison’s novel.”

Karla F. C. Holloway
“*Beloved: A Spiritual*”
Toni Morrison’s Beloved: A Casebook
eds. William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay
(Oxford 1999) 74

“*Tar Baby*, with its black and white stereotypes, does not in any way prepare us for the complexities either of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, or *Paradise*. *Tar Baby* is, in fact, programmatic, more diagnostic than fully-fashioned. In its stretch for significance, perhaps more than any other Morrison novel it reaches back toward *Invisible Man*. The central figure, Jadine, is caught between black and white; herself black, she has been educated by Valerian Street, an eccentric white man who owns the ‘island plantation’ where Jadine lives. The question raised by Son, the island intruder and ostensible ‘bad guy,’ is whether Jadine has retained or lost her blackness. Her education, her ease in integrating herself in France, her correct grammar and rhetoric wiped out her blackness, as Son perceives it, so that she is caught, anomalously, as neither white nor black, but as some grotesque mutant.

Son is himself fixed in his blackness, although unfortunately Morrison presents it stereotypically. His blackness involves everything Jadine despises: he has no vocation, he has neither work nor ambition, he lacks style, he flows with events, gets into trouble, flees, and attaches himself, apparently, only to his small town, Eloë, a cultural backwater. He is the categorical loser. Yet Son strikes something in Jadine, although the attraction of his blackness is linked mainly to his sexuality—once again, Morrison presents the black male as appealing to women not through accomplishment or purpose but through sex.

If Son is a black male stereotype, Valerian Street, despite his eccentricities, is a white stereotype. As a kind of enlightened slave master, he bestows his largesse on all the island blacks who work for him. With his greenhouse as his Garden and the island as his domain, Valerian has created an antebellum Eden. He is tended by black servants who owe everything to him, and whose lives have been corrupted by his largesse. Without him, they have nowhere to go, nothing to do. Valerian is married to Margaret, whom he sighted at a beauty contest, when she was seventeen and he twenty years her senior. He offers her everything an island kingdom holds, but she slowly grows crazy in her isolation as a beautiful object surrounded by other flawless objects.

As a pathological consequence of her combined boredom, cabin fever, and feelings of resentment, she sticks pins into her small child, Michael, as a means, somehow, of validating her own existence. In this respect, Margaret becomes the stereotypical mistress: with endless time on her hands, she empowers herself by torturing (not seriously) an infant and small child. This is in many ways a typical Morrison ploy: the way in which a woman seeks control, by abusing or killing her child, Morrison rotates the act into a racial agenda in *Beloved*, and there makes it not only personal but social and political. Here in *Tar Baby*, the sticking of Michael merely seems an oddity in a woman who is more categorized than created. All this, of course, changes with *Beloved*, six years after *Tar Baby*....

Morrison is unsurpassed in her ability to root people in their place, in delineating what seem ordinary lives, in using the seemingly trivial as a trope for a large sense of life. In *Tar Baby*, however, the advocacy parts—to examine black-white relationships where each representative of his or her race becomes symbolic—falls precipitously into stereotypes. It is as if the book were several short fictions that had to be blended into a novel, while the strength of what becomes the novel lies in the shorter segments. The first stereotype is Valerian Street, who, as a wealthy man, had settled upon a Caribbean island as a kind of benevolent plantation master—surrounded by an entourage of black workers; a master-slave relationship modern style, where money, whiteness, and caste buy everything.

The setup is literarily untenable, while perhaps ideologically sound as a partial metaphor of contemporary America. The exaggerations that fit the political agenda debilitate the literary one. Although the blacks are the stronger figures, they, too, are stereotypical, along with cliché-ridden scenes. Valerian has helped Jadine, daughter of his cook and houseman, gain an education; and she, in turn, takes up with Son, a prototypical black man from hell. Son is so stereotyped he has no particular features: lazy, uneducated, a great stud, physically magnetic, and insistent on ‘going home,’ even while he has lived undetected in the Street household. When Son—the name makes one wince—encounters Jadine, he mocks her education and aspirations; he insists that she must have traded sex for education with Street. All locales—even the Southern town where Son lives, Eloë—are stereotypical, including Manhattan, the Caribbean island on which Street has his estate.”

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1980-2000
(Xlibris 2001) 144-45, 293-94

Michael Hollister (2014)